

English translation of:
Mishima Yukio, *Thieves* 盗賊 (1947-1948)
Trans. By Jennifer Cullen

CHAPTER ONE

ORIGIN OF THE TALE

“A grande passion is the privilege of people who have nothing to do”
- Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Grey

It may appear at first glance that those who conceal their emotions are satisfied with the role of invulnerable observer. Yet such people in particular carry the mysteries and romances of the modern age in their hearts and are led to unexpected, archaic tragedy. The dark chambers of their firmly shuttered hearts play the role of the dungeons of ancient castles in fairy tales; the gulf between their hearts and others becomes the dangerous dark moat that the adventurer must swim across.

The hero of our glorious ancient tragedies – a courageous young man wounded by a disappointed love for another man’s wife, his fevered blood extinguished in the prison dew – would today become a mediocre success, his impulsiveness granting him a long life of revelry.

If the romantic tragedy enacted by external events were transferred to the inner heart, it would appear to others nothing more than a quixotic comedy. Therein lies the modern significance of tragedy.

Thus, a strange tragic epic presents itself through a self-concealing character; a character, for example, like Akihide Fujimura.

Having tired of the scenery of the Gora Mountain chalet, the Countess Fujimura spent the summer in a hotel on the S plain with her son. The Count went to Gora as usual, alone.

The hotel on S plain had only just been built. In the style of a small mountain inn, it was also open in the winter for skiing. The front lawn of the hotel fell away in a gentle slope down to a large pond. From the second floor windows one looked down at the reflection of clouds and the Japanese Alps on the surface of the pond.

The countess’ son Akihide had graduated from Gakushuin University’s Department of Japanese Literature that spring. Akihide had been raised in generous circumstances. As was the family custom, he traveled with his parents during each school vacation. The diaries Akihide presented to his teachers at Gakushuin Elementary School at the end of each trip were the most overstuffed with colored pencil sketches and picture postcards of all the students. A taciturn youth, Akihide was thought to be extremely promising. On the other hand, he was also considered extremely unreliable. Perhaps that very unreliability was his promising point. His was an unstable resoluteness; the misplaced courage occasionally displayed by those too well behaved.

On the morning of the tenth day of their stay at the hotel, Akihide came out to the lobby with his mother and wanly flipped through the pages of the English tourist guides spread out on the countertop. It appeared that summer at S plain that summer would pass through the high skies on sparkling wings without settling on earth. In the fireplace, white birch burnt in lovely color. The moment Akihide shifted his gaze toward the glass doors that looked out on the far mountain range, a bee-like buzzing was heard from the scenic garden. He exchanged a dubious glance with his mother.

It was no doubt a car rolling up the steep hill opposite the pond. The sixteen or seventeen-year-old bellboy who had been joking with the man at the front office rushed out through the glass doors and then came in again saying, “I bet it’s the Harada’s.”

Hearing this, Mrs. Fujimura said, “I wonder if it isn’t the Haradas of Yamato. You know Mrs. Harada, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t know her.” Akihide answered politely.

The car was already past the gate near the pond and appeared to be having difficulty climbing up the steep gravel path. The muffled noise rose disturbingly, and the bellboy went out again to meet the car.

Akihide allowed most of the tourist guides to slip from his knees. Unconsciously he tried to follow the avid gaze of his mother as she directed her attention to the car. A child often anticipates a mystery in this way. It seems to the child that his mother’s gaze holds the power to evoke a mystery. We often see a child clutching his mother’s hem in the park, marveling at the bewildering, unknown, lively world around him. He believes that the supernatural power of his mother’s eye has gathered together these marvels and spread them

out in front of his eyes.

Setting that aside, however: the first person to step down from the halted car climbed the two or three steps to the lobby and entered. A beauty such as he'd never seen before. At first, Akihide felt calm looking at her, but that may have been a sort of anesthetic mechanism.

The young lady inquired after a room at the front office in the low feverish voice of a movie heroine and turned occasionally to face the entryway. The elderly couple standing outside was pointing at the pond and the mountains, asking questions of the bellboy. Before long all three came slowly up the stone path.

"So, it is them!" The Countess rose to her feet. Akihide was startled. He had forgotten his mother's presence.

After a brief moment of being unable to recall her name, Mr. Harada recognized Mrs. Fujimura and presented a faultless expression of delighted surprise. The two women rushed up to each other and lamented their long separation in the terms of young schoolgirls. Mrs. Fujimura introduced her absentmindedly lingering son in order to animate him, and Mrs. Harada spoke warmly of meeting him when he was an elementary school student. At that point, a shadow approached and darkened Akihide's shoes as he stood hanging his head.

"This is Yoshiko," said Mrs. Harada. Mrs. Fujimura gazed intently at the young woman. Unable to do the same, Akihide kept his eyes lowered while exchanging greetings, envying his mother all the while.

Clouds being rampant both morning and night, the grass was only dry when the sun was at its highest. The surrounding mountains regained their distinct shadings of mixed colors in the brilliant sunlight for only a few hours of each day.

N pond was surrounded by dense forest, but here and there bordering the water, grassy areas had been left behind and forgotten. Yoshiko made it her daily habit to nap in these spots leaning against Akihide's knees. The most dangerous safety was to her the coziest place to be. Because for most girls there is no real security aside from this kind. Half asleep, she listened to the sound of a small waterfall within the forest. Half asleep, she felt the shadow of the clouds as they drifted over her. It was easy for her to forget the person whose knees served as her pillow, for he did not move even the tiniest bit, in an attempt not to disturb her sleep.

Mrs. Harada noticed the symptoms of their love in advance of Mrs. Fujimura. Before she noticed the change in her daughter through past experience, she noticed the change in her daughter's companion, and that was how she knew. The quiet well-mannered youth began to smile sarcastically as though to belie his feverish glances. Later on, at a mealtime, he supplied Mrs. Harada with an answer that did not match her question. Mrs. Fujimura was forced to reprove her son, but Mrs. Harada suddenly felt uneasy, realizing that Mrs. Fujimura flushed and scolded him recognizing only her son's bad manners.

Mrs. Harada's reasons for coming to S plain for the summer this year instead of Mt. Yo were fading. Hadn't they chosen S plain as this year's resort because social transactions would not be necessary, given the countless troublesome incidents that constantly surrounded Yoshiko at Mt. Yo every summer? The trouble that must now follow rose vividly before Mrs. Harada's eyes. Besides which, her busy husband had returned to the capital on the second or third day of their visit. Mrs. Harada grew tired just looking at her daughter.

Soon Akihide and Yoshiko began taking daily walks. Even so Mrs. Fujimura seemed not to notice.

Mrs. Harada had been relying on Mrs. Fujimura's nervous motherly love – it seemed she sensed her son's every movement – but was now completely astonished at Mrs. Fujimura's stubborn ignorance. She would not believe anything she didn't want to, and was oblivious to things she didn't want to notice. It seems that people like Mrs. Fujimura, who spend many decades in a peaceful environment, are endowed with this strange behavior: they possess a will of coagulated peace that controls their unconscious.

Akihide beckoned to Yoshiko from the balcony late one night when no one was there. He had wanted to cool the heat on his cheeks, but instead the night wind and fog were like fire to him. Yoshiko silently grasped the rail.

"What are you looking at?"

Yoshiko thought it amusing that words spoken by anybody into this silence would carry a strange solemnity. Before answering she winked lightly at the fog.

"Over on the pond..." Saying this, she glanced over at the pond for the first time. The fearsome scene she beheld there snatched away her next words.

It was as if only the form of the pond floated up in a vague outline between spaces in the fog. From the second floor balcony, the pond had an odd curvature and width to it. Above the pond fog floated spottily,

in some areas thick, in some thin. The surface of the water was the color of zinc. In what must have been a rare phenomenon, the hidden moon sank its overflowing moonbeams into the surface, where like countless undefined pillars of light they reflected off the constantly moving fog. Their dim brightness, like rays at sunrise, and the thick bottomless shadow of the pond's surface moving ever so gently, ceaselessly switched positions.

Akihide granted only one glance to this scene. He felt that if he continued to look he would be enveloped by the same agitation as Yoshiko: some kind of dark unrest. In the depths of that agitated state one could feel Yoshiko's unconscious plan to awaken a blind impulse in Akihide on the pretext of this eerie natural scene. Using the fear that the scene aroused in her heart. A sort of gloomy coquetry which made use of the uncanny natural sight.

Because Akihide understood the danger he granted only one glance before shifting his eyes. But danger, wrapped in a sweet fragrance, had already edged up to his side.

One morning, Mrs. Fujimura found Yoshiko's handkerchief as she came to the entrance of the wood on her morning walk. When she returned to her room she washed it herself and neatly dried it.

At the next meal, she arrived at her seat, produced the handkerchief from her *obi*, and handed it over to Yoshiko.

"Is this yours?" She waited an instant while Yoshiko inspected the handkerchief, trying to glean some insight from the girl's expression.

Even before she took the handkerchief however, Yoshiko's countenance expressed nothing other than gratitude toward Mrs. Fujimura. This had a comforting, even honest quality.

"Oh! Thank you Aunt Fujimura. And you even washed it..."

Smiling, Mrs. Fujimura turned her face casually toward her son. She saw on his mouth a revealingly cold smile such as he'd never before presented to his mother. Mrs. Fujimura was finally forced to realize that the situation was not good.

Akihide's character was such that the instant he attained something he became obsessed with thoughts of losing it. It was his nature to imagine losing the object even before he could be rejected. What was that shudder for when he first saw Yoshiko? Doubtless he had shuddered, imagining at once the moment he would have her, and then the moment she would slip through his fingers. People who are called dreamers by society are actually only partly so, for they can easily live in peace within a daydream. Compared to them, Akihide was perhaps a realist gone one degree too far. In Akihide there wasn't any room for dreams because possibility and probability appeared in such a realistic form. His power of imagination was in fact an inborn, instantaneous power of reason. When something happened to him, he ran with the worst his imagination could produce, and pressing himself to the far wall of that image, his breast pounded with the question: wouldn't reality also rush forward to this wall, following the same course he had? Usually the waves of reality crested far from the edge where he stood paralyzed and retreated, leaving him with a touch of dissatisfaction. If reality took an unfortunate turn and did rush down his blind alley, enveloping him as he'd expected and carrying him off, he would probably feel, along with his despair, a touch of satisfaction.

While lightly grasping Yoshiko's hand, flexible as a young palm leaf, he felt a repeated shudder – "What if this person were to disappear?" Who could say that at the bottom of this shudder there did not lurk that primitive desire for tragedy – the frivolous sweetness an adventurer feels at the instant of his death; the joy of a child at a circus or at war.

"I'd love to fill up my room with flowers." To this idle remark of Mrs. Fujimura's, Mrs. Harada answered, "I heard there are flowers on the other side of the wood." And so after luncheon a flower-picking walk was planned.

They invited Yoshiko and Akihide, but both answered vaguely and made no move to go. The women had no choice but to make picnic preparations just for two.

"Round trip is about four kilometers," said Akihide. Yoshiko and Akihide saw the basket-toting mothers off, looking excited.

They made slow progress, as the small path through the woods had been cleared for strollers in such a way that it forced them on a roundabout route, crossing the same brook twice. Halfway through the wood, Mrs. Fujimura lowered herself onto a bench of white birch.

"My head hurts somewhat. I've been a little off since we left."

Mrs. Harada did not want to take her back to the hotel at this point. Insensitive to her distress, she exhorted her, "You'll feel better as we walk." But Mrs. Fujimura stubbornly insisted on returning.

The two women returned to the hotel in about half the time it had taken them on the way out, as both were for some reason trying to walk faster than the other.

Once back, Mrs. Fujimura found that the door to her room was locked.

When she arrived at Mrs. Harada's room to inform her of the fact, she wore a frightened look. Her eyes flashed. She suspected Mrs. Harada's complicity.

"Do you have the key?" Mrs. Harada asked.

Mrs. Fujimura searched in her *obi* as though it had just occurred to her. "Yes."

"Then we can open it and see." Mrs. Harada's words were contrary to her actual desire to leave the door closed.

"I can't do it, won't you please open it for me?" Mrs. Fujimura begged.

Taking the key, Mrs. Harada made an effort to put off the moment she would have to use it, even if only slightly. She tried to hold up time inside that key. Making no move to go open the door to the room, she scratched her head lightly with the key while gazing vaguely out the window.

At that point the door opened quietly and Akihide and Yoshiko appeared. They had heard the alarming noise of the hastily turning knob a few moments ago. At the proper time they had left the room and come to Mrs. Harada's. Seeing them, Mrs. Harada dropped the key to the floor in an excess of relief.

Mrs. Fujimura leaned on the back of a chair looking pale. The magnetism she had ceaselessly held over her son withered, and she immediately perceived the danger to both herself and her son. Oddly, Yoshiko and Mrs. Harada were excluded from her thoughts. Her heart repeatedly called her son's name in a hoarse voice, as though groping through the gloom. She felt as though she could hear the echo of hoofs coming to disrupt her and her son's fate. Or perhaps for the first time she realized that there was a breach in their intimacy, that something between them simply did not agree. Is this what led her to believe in their common danger? Mrs. Fujimura was unconsciously trying to cover these black moments with the unreasonable contrivance of a mother's love, in which love and understanding can't help but conflict.

Akihide looked at his mother's face, turned toward him, with unexpected calm. Something dark still rippled in her expression. She did not understand her son. She looked like a mother driving her son into a perilous gloom.

With their backs to the window, Yoshiko and Mrs. Harada viewed this tragic moment between mother and child. Mrs. Harada felt as though she had seen this situation before her many times. The scenes piled up: in the same dim room, the same unhappy mother and child faced each other pretending to harmony, eager to keep up appearances. Most often their unhappiness was no more than an illusion – though unable to forget Yoshiko, the young man would seek a bride of suitably shallow individuality on whom he could project those unforgettable traces.

The outline of Yoshiko's hair was lit up beautifully by the bright mountain light from the window behind her. Breathing in this atmosphere of ultimacy that she thrived in, she appeared comfortable and carefree. She recognized her own strength: love was clearly her possession. The dangerous balance she had come to desire constantly was no more than a sport.

Realizing that Akihide had turned to her, she averted her eyes.

Over the years, Mrs. Fujimura had come to happily accept common societal opinions. Though she had been a lady of accomplishment in her day, at some point she had expelled all form of talent that might deprive her heart of peace. Already she thought of nothing but the wedding of her son and Yoshiko. Carrying things out in secret, as was the way of the Fujimura family, would prolong the crisis and there would also be a danger of enlarging the crisis through the delay. It was necessary to explain the plan frankly to Akihide alone, in order to pull him away from Yoshiko for the time being.

Mrs. Harada, who hadn't noticed this conspiracy, was visited one morning by a cheerful Akihide.

"Mother and I are leaving today. Thank you for everything." Hearing this, Mrs. Harada called out her daughter's name. She felt that only her daughter could unravel this mystery for her.

There was no answer from Yoshiko. Mrs. Harada went in embarrassment out the door to look.

Mrs. Harada's haste amused Akihide. He was also delighted, as were all Fujimuras, by such poor human frailty.

Mrs. Harada seemed even more startled after returning to Akihide's side. However, this time the surprise was clearly counterfeit. She was trying to hide the relief she had gradually become conscious of. Still

standing, she said over and over, "Somehow I will detain your mother. How could you go home first and leave us here!"

After lunch, the four of them climbed into the car. A western family staying at the hotel was returning on the lower path from a walk, holding bouquets of wildflowers. They gave a bouquet to the people in the car and bade them goodbye. The fat husband raised his walking stick up high. The two women in the car responded with a wave of their hands.

This excitement silenced the four for a short time.

"The Schneiders are a happy family...hmmm?" Mrs. Fujimura spoke without stopping to think. Mrs. Harada couldn't help but think of her husband. She didn't know what he was doing now. Reading her mother's thoughts, Yoshiko smiled slightly and lowered her eyes.

"What is it?" asked Akihide smiling.

Yoshiko turned red with anger at the childishness of this question.

"What a jerk." She merely glanced at his face. Instantly Akihide thought that Yoshiko must have perceived his conspiracy with his mother, and had seen supporting evidence of it during the silence. He threw a satisfied glance out onto the village spread below them, its fields like a quilt, shining in the sun.

As soon as Mrs. Fujimura and Akihide's train had left, Mrs. Harada sank into a chair on the platform, relieved.

"I'm tired. Isn't there somewhere we can have a tea near the station?"

Yoshiko knew that her mother had something she wanted to discuss. Her mother, who usually behaved like a friend, annoyed her during these crises. She saw her mother at such times as a friend who had suddenly betrayed her for no reason. They left the station and entered a country style coffee shop.

While drinking her tea, Mrs. Harada asked, "If by chance there was talk of Fujimura asking for your hand, then what?"

"I haven't even thought about it." Yoshiko answered in a blurred, happy voice. Hearing it, Mrs. Harada was relieved. A makeshift relief in that her daughter's actions followed a pattern and once again she had not deviated from it. Of course, she had wondered what she would do if her daughter had replied that she would marry him.

"Tomorrow or the next day Yasukawa is supposed to come." Yoshiko said casually.

"To the hotel? You called him?"

"I sent a telegram yesterday. I knew that the Fujimuras were leaving, so..."

Mrs. Harada stopped herself before she could get angry. In a brave mood, she made an effort to wait calmly for the young Yasukawa with her daughter. This effort exposed her own secret desire, her unconscious wish to be involved in her daughter's idle pursuit of pleasure, even as an outsider. At nightfall they returned to the hotel.

Having waited for Mrs. Harada's return to the capitol to visit, Mrs. Fujimura got only an indefinite response. Her proposal, lodged on the grounds of mending the young couple's error, startled Mrs. Harada. What surprised her was the discovery that against all odds rumors about her daughter's independent spirit, which might make the ordinary step of marriage seem almost a bad result, had not reached the Fujimura household. For Mrs. Fujimura spoke as if her own pure son and the innocent pure young lady had fallen in love under the guidance of an evil spirit. Mrs. Harada employed delay tactics. By the end of September it was already clear that the Harada household had no intention of going through with the marriage and Mrs. Fujimura declared the severing of all relations.

Convictions unfounded in conviction stand fastest. And Akihide possessed acute powers of deduction besides. Under the mistaken impression that matters would not be taken to the extreme in any event, he had begun to indulge his usual dissatisfaction. He had resolved himself to loss and come to terms with it so early on, that now he had lost all means of measuring the present moment, just as one finds it difficult to measure growth within one's own family. He couldn't believe he now faced the very loss he had feared. Having been raised in comfort, having never before known the taste of pain, this sluggish ache unaccompanied at first by subjective symptoms was beyond Akihide's understanding. A lack of self-consciousness like that of a young girl was apparent at times in Akihide's emotions.

Naturally, at this rupture Akihide should have been quite upset. Thus he took the fact that he was not greatly upset as proof of an optimistic nature, and was unexpectedly confident. His belief that he had not

actually been hurt was probably what spurred him on to crisis. But no one can stop the strange impulse of the skater who heads for thin ice, almost as though hoping the ice will break.

Akihide defied his mother's ban and telephoned the Harada's house in Koishikawa-Owamura. I want to meet her, he said, please let me come.

The presence of evil is often seen in men, but is extremely rare in women. It is also hard to find a true hypocrite among women. Women can not be anything other than what they are. Or rather, they can only easily be "themselves." The reason why it is easy to win women over to religion lies herein. Yoshiko believed that it was not her fault Akihide's desires had been refused. She wanted only to be understood. Yet it was a good thing that her "self," who did not love Akihide even a little bit, was not understood.

Yoshiko knew well the side effects of an excuse. Without making any, she merely wore a pained look when it seemed the issue would be touched upon.

Actually, her weak points appeared at such moments, and should have silently indicated opportunity. Akihide should have summoned his courage and exposed the self-deceit even she wasn't aware of. Maybe the illusion of "being wounded" would have thrown her into the ecstasy of a martyr -- but Akihide misunderstood his role. He listened to her like a quiet schoolboy. Even when he didn't understand something, he gallantly scolded himself: it is my own fault that I don't understand. He did not bear in mind the effect of age. Though touching a woman's heart while behaving as one completely ignorant of her heart should be a youth's top priority.

"As I thought, this rupture wasn't her idea. There is some reason for it she can't tell me." He concluded.

What we call love is by nature jointly owned, and seems to cause much unhappiness due to its vague boundaries of possession. Akihide had intended to humbly believe only in his own love, but before he could stop himself he believed even more deeply in a love existing within Yoshiko for himself.

As the peony tree opens up flowers, a cruel instinct awoke within her. The desire to discipline him.

The more intensely Akihide thought about how difficult it would be to replace Yoshiko, the smaller the rewards necessary to satisfy his heart. He saw this as proof that his respect for her was growing. Now, just gazing at her for a few minutes in rapture, instead of everyday as at S plain, was enough to supply him with happiness for ten days. He could cultivate a whole day of pleasant dreams simply by hearing her voice on the telephone.

Does a perverse submissiveness, a desire for defeat, lurk behind the strong, impulsive instinct to discipline a man that occasionally awakens within a woman? If a woman completes the disciplining of a quiet domestic animal according to her wishes, just the sight of it becomes annoying and she sends it away. She waits for the appearance of an extremely dangerous, strongly individual, ferocious animal who will evade her command.

One day late in autumn, when Akihide phoned he found that Yoshiko had left the day before on a trip to Kishu with her father. She had not said even one word about it when he had met her two or three days before. Had he known in advance, he definitely would have gone with her.

Now he did not know when Yoshiko's Kishu trip would end, either. The maid who answered the phone persisted in the single reply: "She's not back yet." Akihide finally ran into Yoshiko by chance; she was clad in riding clothes attending a horse fair that he had gone to on his Uncle's invitation.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I was thinking of calling you... I came home yesterday."

Akihide just glanced at the quiet boy at her side, younger than himself, who she introduced as her cousin. He felt no particular jealousy. For some people covetousness stirs up jealousy, others become aware of their covetousness through their jealousy; but in Akihide, who had thought of nothing but betrayal from the beginning, there was no place for jealousy.

Yoshiko parted from Akihide, telling him she had to go somewhere, and climbed into a car alone. She got out in front of a western dress shop behind the Ginza.

Looking in the mirror at a basting pin shining faintly on her shoulder, she felt the pin was a concrete expression of the irritation and gloom which always awaited her after being confronted with Akihide's ceaseless looks of complaint. She realized, through the glitter of the pin in the mirror, that she was growing more and more irritated. This kind of crawling irritation was unpleasant; outright annoyance would have been preferable. If Akihide was blatantly unbearable, she might have loved him.

After the day of the races, Yoshiko disappeared from Akihide's sight. Phone calls and letters were to

no avail. Two or three times he came in vain to visit and was forced into the parlor by Mrs. Harada who intercepted him in the entryway and detained him endlessly with noncommittal conversation.

"I think she'll be home soon..." Mrs. Harada would look frequently out into the twilight of the shortening days.

This occurred several times, and soon his courage to visit the Harada house dwindled. In any event, his manners would no longer allow it.

The adventurous steps another youth might think up – like spreading out a net in a spot she was likely to come to, then never leaving her side until he achieved his desires -- were to him only dreams. "How could I do something so fantastic, like in a fairy tale?" He couldn't imagine. His fantasies, which covered only the familiar, made things an ordinary person would do seem like a fantasy.

What was Mrs. Fujimura doing during these dangerous months? She wouldn't have dreamed that her son frequently visited the Haradas even after she had prohibited contact. (Even though lying to his mother about where he went did not trouble his conscience at all, it is necessary to note that Akihide was hampered from start to finish by general etiquette and manners.)

Moreover, Mrs. Fujimura, thanks to her surprising will power, was able to ignore things she didn't want to believe, and to bar from her mind things she didn't want to consider. When it seemed that Akihide had begun to shut himself up indoors and devote himself to studies now that he couldn't meet Yoshiko, she was even more relieved. She first began to worry at the end of the year when Akihide stubbornly refused to go on their customary vacation.

Even though she saw Akihide's weight loss, Mrs. Fujimura put it down to her own paranoia and forgot it. She brought Akihide to the doctor only because it had become obvious even to the Count. The doctor said it was due to insufficient exercise, and so she made her son walk with her mornings and evenings. They walked, hardly speaking, among the many wintry hills of their exclusive residential section. At times they grew tired of the same roads and ventured into town.

Walking without looking around him, Akihide frequently failed to notice approaching trains. Mrs. Fujimura would call him to a halt with an unreserved yell from behind, loud enough to cause people in the street to turn and look. As opposed to when he was a boy, this did not particularly embarrass Akihide. He only turned and gazed vaguely at his mother. Nor did Mrs. Fujimura particularly mind that they looked like an unhappy mother and son. It seemed she was enjoying a comfortable misery.

One day at the end of February, when dirty snow remained by the curbs, Mrs. Fujimura set out directly after breakfast. She returned close to noon to find Akihide out. The maid, forbidden to mention the phone call from Mrs. Harada during Mrs. Fujimura's absence, told her that Akihide had gone out to meet his friend Niikura.

Looking at Akihide's face when he returned at nightfall, Mrs. Fujimura exclaimed, "Your color is not good. Do you have a fever?"

This seemed to give Akihide a hint at a reply. "I'm fine. Just a little cold."

It was odd: how had he walked home to his bed? The exhaustion from his aimless rambling on his way home from the Haradas' could barely calm the emotions welling up within him.

Three or four days before, there had been a rare guest at the Haradas'. Miyake, a friend of Yoshiko's from childhood. Directly after college he had entered his father's manufacturing company and been transferred to their site in Taiwan for training. He had become familiar with the land, and now found it difficult to be away. It was rumored that there was another reason he did not respond to the courteous summons of the main office in Tokyo – his father had separated from his sick mother and in Miyake's absence had brought a second wife into the house. As he was now obliged to visit the main office, he came to Tokyo as prearranged, but was staying in a hotel. When his commitments had been taken care of, he had visited the Haradas on a whim before returning to Taiwan.

The Haradas welcomed him like a son. Tanned by the southern sun of an exotic land, Miyake was a first class hero in their eyes for not mentioning the heartache of the discord in his home. He maintained a perfect balance of savagery and elegance. Miyake, absorbed by mountain climbing when he was in school, still had not lost that expression of longing for far off dazzling sights.

The Haradas entreated him to leave the hotel and stay with them until he left for Taiwan. From that night on, he rapidly charmed them all with his happy boasting, even Mr. Harada's seventy-year-old mother. He told them stories: of the strange sugar thief, who though himself an exacting beekeeper, stole from the

company stock of sugar instead of using his own; and of a festival featuring a dancing fire dragon float that wriggled down the street.

Something happened during those three or four days. Yoshiko and Miyake displayed a strange intimacy based on mutual maliciousness. When the family gathered to talk, Yoshiko acted as though she wasn't listening to Miyake's constant boasting. In turn, Miyake did not answer when Yoshiko spoke as though slighting her on purpose. Even Mrs. Harada did not clearly grasp the subtle indications.

Probably a desire for secrecy and a desire that others know all were battling it out for dominance within both. The latter desire was expressed paradoxically in the way they led others to think they no longer got along. Mrs. Harada, a socially ordinary woman, could not help but wish that Yoshiko would not cause any embarrassment for Miyake, and that the two would become closer. Thus they were also allowed to openly show intimacy.

One morning Miyake woke after nine. It was an unusually warm and beautiful morning. He spent it lounging in the window chair. Since the previous evening, Yoshiko had been pestering him with her capricious desire to go to Taiwan with him. This morning, faced with the bother of repeating his excuse that there was no reason for her to come along as he was only going to wrap things up and would return in less than a month (actually there were things to "wrap up" which would cause him trouble if Yoshiko discovered them), Miyake took the initiative in the following manner before Yoshiko could speak.

"I'd like to meet some old school friends. Ask everyone what's going on..."

He also mentioned that he didn't particularly feel like going around to visit and so Yoshiko suggested, "Why don't you invite them here?"

"Everyone's at work during the day..." He thought. "Oh, there is one person who is usually at home during the day."

Fujimura had been two years behind Miyake at Gakushuin University. Miyake had often seen the members of the history society because there was a hole in the wall between the history society room and the next door mountaineering club room in which he was always hanging around neglecting his studies. One day the history society room was searched by the faculty supervisor immediately after Miyake had chucked five or six cigarette butts through the crack in the wall for fun. The butts were found and all members of the history society present were given a warning. The next day, his face blue with anger, Fujimura came to the mountaineering clubroom when Miyake was alone to reproach him. Miyake could still remember the face of timid Fujimura that day – Akihide couldn't say a word, he'd just stood hanging his head as though it were he who was being censured. Miyake, with an irritation he felt when watching people weaker than himself, shouted domineeringly. Fujimura flew at him. His physical strength was pitifully weak.

This fight was the beginning of a continuing friendship often found between people with almost exact opposite qualities. They were like two extremely strong drugs trying to neutralize each other. When they left school, with Fujimura becoming an academic and Miyake going to Taiwan, communication had all but ceased.

"Who?"

"A guy named Fujimura."

"Fujimura?" Yoshiko repeated the name, unconsciously making a grim face.

Though Miyake was young, he occasionally showed skillful perception, having spent time in a foreign land. Perhaps he had heard exaggerated details of Yoshiko and Akihide's relationship at S plain from someone. Maybe he now suggested calling Fujimura in order to test Yoshiko.

With the usual arrogance of a woman toward a man she has discarded, Yoshiko underestimated Fujimura. She regretted that she had loved a person like him merely because by chance there was no one else at S plain. She counted it as one of the most boring amongst the amours of her past.

Therefore it would only wound her pride if Miyake were to believe the details he had heard. She had to enlighten him – not for his sake but for her own. She must laugh at Fujimura in front of Miyake, in order to express to Miyake how highly she valued him.

"I ride with Fujimura often. I'll give him a call."

Miyake looked at Yoshiko as she left the room as a teacher might look at a favorite student he has just punished. Then he polished his pipe, looking bored.

Akihide couldn't follow what Yoshiko was saying. He only repeated answers that were slightly wide of the mark, as though muttering excuses, with a faraway look.

When he had picked up the receiver the first thought that flashed through his mind was: "Maybe she thought of me and became so sad she can hardly wait to see me."

Thanks to his secretiveness, he had not received a single piece of information about Yoshiko through friends. That was the only reason he was able to entertain such a thought.

Akihide hailed a taxi. He found the most decrepit one he could. Praying that on the way the taxi would collide and be mashed to tiny particles of dust, he climbed in.

When the car vibrated, sending up a violent rattle on the bumpy road, his breast was constricted with the sweet chill one feels near a waterfall.

Akihide saw Miyake first. He made great efforts to take this innocently contrived joke lightly. He was grateful to them both for putting on this interesting display for his sake. But the actors and the guest gradually switched positions. He was left upon the ruined stage alone. Miyake's words, filled with friendship, only made the situation worse. Yoshiko was trying to create an impression in front of Miyake that there was "nothing at all" between herself and Akihide. Akihide felt this immediately and went along with it – he lent a hand, he sacrificed himself. He accepted the unspoken request of her rude conspiracy and faithfully, even to an undesirable degree, implemented it. Miyake sensed the crisis, and tried to restore the situation to the original joke. He only served to wound Akihide all the more.

When he thought about it, this foreseen turn of events was the result of his own actions. Why was he only able to act like himself? Why was he only able to be faithful to himself? (For though it looked like he was being faithful to Yoshiko the reality was otherwise.) Faithful. A trite social norm he had imposed on his own heart.

At any rate, it was a mystery how he had walked home to his bed that night. The exhaustion from his aimless rambling on his way home from the Haradas' could barely calm the emotions welling up within him.

CHAPTER TWO

RESOLUTION AND ITS STRANGE EFFECTS

"In general, taking on responsibilities is a sign of impending death"

16th Century Irish Poem

Jealousy is a vital strength. Yet amongst those who mature with an underdeveloped soul, there are many who know what it is to suffer, but have never known jealousy. They happily substitute far more dangerous subtle and refined emotions for jealousy, which appears dangerous, but is in reality safe.

The Fujimura family cemetery plot was located at a certain temple in Murasakino. The day of the annual memorial service held there was approaching. As branches of the Fujimura family and two or three of the main line had settled in Kyoto, it had become a tradition for Count and Countess Fujimura to go to Kyoto with Akihide on the death anniversary of Akikage, the collector of the famous Fujimura Collection. Count Akikage had not studied abroad during his career as was a standard part of the life of most Meiji noblemen. In cooperation with a renowned American scholar of eastern art, he collected ancient eastern and western art objects of unestablished value while making exchanges and mediating many such exchanges as well. However, it seemed to be the fate of the family that dissimilar sons would be born to their fathers. His legitimate son Akinaga felt only relief when according to his father's will the art of the huge collection was doled out in all directions until nothing remained. (There was little criticism from society at this method of disposal, as the collection itself was not systematic either.) Akinaga had studied in France as a training officer in his youth, and when he returned home he told everyone he met, "My father's collection? If you took that thing to Paris it would look like a junk shop." – Count Akikage's disposition seems to have been better expressed in his second son, Akinobu. Akinobu, Akihide's uncle, devoted himself to studying tea ceremony after leaving his architecture course at mid-point, and had decided to live in Kyoto. An easy-going man with no children, he put his heart into his work, which though elegant, is considered quite tedious by most.

Grandfather Akikage died in the spring of Akihide's eleventh year and since then Akihide had never missed the trip to Kyoto for the services. His memories from each unvarying year piled up and formed a thick, unforgettable layer amongst memories of other travels; it was nearly impossible to distinguish last year's trip from that of the year before. The unchanging faces and surroundings mingled in his mind along with the **Enshu style ??** tea garden. Though time was already washing away many of those people, their quiet hospitality lived on unchanged over the ages in his memory.

Suddenly, Count Fujimura caught a cold. The doctor even stayed with them one night for fear of pneumonia developing. Fortunately the cold lightened and his condition improved, but as Akihide's mother

had lingering worries of a relapse, they decided to send Akihide to Kyoto as the family's representative. He left late on purpose, only one day before the service, in order to avoid traveling with the two or three elderly relatives who lived in Tokyo.

Upon boarding the train Akihide felt an indescribable relief. He'd been edgy day and night, hiding the horrible pain in his heart from his mother. Perhaps this nervousness had helped more than anything else to divert him from the pain. But if so, why did he feel such relief now? Did he want to become more intimate with this tragic pain? Had his mother been the obstacle? The train raced through the gem-like cloudy day. Outside the window, the rosy, dew-covered rows of tea plants silently wriggled by.

Gradually he started to worry. Like a person who searches for the wallet he is sure he put in his breast pocket, he found that his pain had disappeared as soon as he defiantly turned to explore it. The strange relief he felt persistently remained. Yoshiko's almost shameless coldness couldn't be mistaken, even by Akihide, for the innocence with which two lovers hide their love from a third party. For even if it had been a manifestation of her efforts to intentionally suppress the kindness in her heart, did that explain her lively looks and kind words for Miyake? (Maybe she had wanted to give Akihide the impression that Miyake was the kind of friend before whom they need not have the slightest reserve by showing excessive intimacy toward him. In any case, shouldn't he meet her one more time without Miyake present? Perhaps he had taken his duty to protect her honor too far and she had misunderstood his perseverance.) He didn't know how many times her enthusiastic (an enthusiasm only contained in words she directed to Miyake, making them sound still more sweet), captivating laugh had repeated in his ears, how many times he had held that sound hidden from his mother. But now, though her voice was only a weak, far away echo, he felt a numbing pleasure steal over him.

Akihide's true nature should appear to us all the more clearly through this anesthetic pleasure. The characteristic Fujimura secretiveness had come to play the role of a safety valve. Who knew how much trouble his grandfather and father had avoided through skillful manipulation of that valve in order to protect their dignity? In order to eliminate the danger their emotions would be read they were extremely frugal with expression. His family seldom cried at the death of a blood relation, and even when a person giving a table speech got too excited and knocked over a fingerbowl, the Fujimuras were able to refrain from laughing without particular effort. They were like nobility who eat only the lukewarm food brought to them down long corridors, pre-tasted countless times for poison. Naturally, Akihide didn't know that this safety valve is likely to become a very dangerous device in a person with a soft heart. – At some point his pride and dignity, which had always been skillfully protected and had not once received even a trifling wound, had atrophied. If a rubber ball is tucked away without momentum, it loses its bounce forever. The failure of a love that passes unknown to others is not so embarrassing. It could not have chipped Akihide's dignity. In short, there was no particular reason for him to be roused to action by this failure. It wasn't even grounds for devoting himself to studies in order to show contempt for women. Strangely enough, one also feels that he didn't need to make up for anything, as he hadn't actually lost anything. The vagueness of his position was enough to make him forget even the escape route of jealousy. Even the wounds mercilessly inflicted by the pain of these past three months during which he had been supported by the fictitious yet fervent certainty that Yoshiko had not discarded him but had only drifted away from him by chance, did not hurt him now thanks to this anesthetic. With the wry smile that is seen on the mouth of an old man as he thinks back on his youth, Akihide thought back on these months as on a fire in which he had gotten burnt because he'd run about tending to this heavy burden, his certainty.

Finally he gave up. Perhaps he had been misdiagnosing himself until now. Maybe he was healthier than the average person. This sweet pleasure stealing over him, this comfort, this trembling: all seemed symptoms of health and normalcy. He gladly believed this with a spiritless dishonesty as a seriously ill person believes each bad indication to be a sign that he is headed for recovery.

The train arrived in Kyoto at close to four. His Uncle Akinobu and his wife came to meet him and greeted him cheerfully with an unexpected and suddenly clumsy, exaggerated intimacy. They had received an express delivery letter from Mrs. Fujimura that morning indicating concern over a slight nervous weakening in her son, courteously asking them to look out for him on his trip. Their monotonous indoor life serving as a magnifying glass, the letter had roused a disproportionate emotional reaction in them that had not yet cooled down, and they had come to meet him in person. Inside the car heading to the Kaguraoka mansion, Akihide felt abashed as his Uncle and Aunt praised his mother's character in unison. It seemed to Akihide, who knew nothing of the letter his mother had sent, that his Aunt and Uncle were praising his mother rather than

criticizing him, seeing in him only exact opposite qualities to those of his mother. This spell of paranoia did not communicate itself to his Uncle Akinobu. When his nephew did not try to match his tone to theirs, he only saw evidence of discord between mother and son. Come to think of it, they probably shouldn't have taken Mrs. Fujimura's letter at face value either, he thought.

At dinner, his Aunt remarked in her naturally childish, shrill tone, "You look exactly like Taeko. When you do that – bow your head a little – you are a carbon copy."

For no reason Akihide was irritated by her discovery of a resemblance to his mother.

"Really. I'm often told that I don't look like mother at all."

His Uncle's expression as he purposely stayed out of the conversation and stared at the hanging scroll made Akihide uneasy.

As he had expected, after dinner, when they had finished their baths and his Aunt had begun hers, Uncle Akinobu questioned him.

"This might sound odd, but you look a little unwell..." (This was just something Uncle Akinobu made up to give himself an opening. Though he'd clearly lost weight, Akihide looked quite healthy to his eyes.) "Is there something wrong you can't discuss with Taeko or my brother? I'm just guessing, but did you have a clash with Taeko?"

Because Akinobu was also a Fujimura and therefore kept Mrs. Fujimura's letter a secret even though he needn't have done so, Akihide did not understand what moved his Uncle to speak of his mother. He did not think it at all suspicious that his Uncle would notice his distress, as he knew that his gloomy appearance couldn't simply be wiped away even though he believed in the cheer in his heart. But the fact that his Uncle imagined discord between his mother and himself wounded him. In this rare situation, separated from his mother on a trip, he perceived her influence to a frightening degree – an influence he had not been conscience of until now. Had his mother actually been persistently and skillfully hindering his growth? Wasn't this the first time that the mother's omnipresent shadow had contributed to her son's unhappiness since he'd left youth behind, a time when he had longed to escape it?

The illusion of a "discord with mother" that his Uncle suggested provided definition to the somewhat trancelike pleasure he'd felt inside the train. Ever since he'd met Yoshiko he had been unable to trust any relief not premised on a certain amount of unhappiness. The artificial hostility toward his mother created by Uncle Akinobu secured his relief. He wanted to believe that the incomprehensible pain that originated with the recollection of his mother was all her fault. Akihide looked at his Uncle. Rather than grateful, he felt wary of his Uncle's meddling as he tried to mediate the fictitious discord.

"No, not really."

Akihide's answer, so clearly a deception, was even easier for his Uncle to understand than a brisk affirmative reply would have been.

"Well if not, that's good." Without smiling, he changed topics like an acrobat. "The service is over tomorrow. I thought you might go to the Kachiyo library the next day...to study."

Absentmindedly Akihide refused in a tactless hurry. "I promised to go to Kobe to a friend's house the day after tomorrow. I planned to stay there two nights and then go home."

"So you'll only be in Kyoto until tomorrow." His Uncle said to himself suspiciously, unaware that Akihide had created this plan on the spur of the moment.

That night for the first time in a long while Akihide dreamed vividly of Yoshiko. It was a summer day. He was on the balcony of a mountain villa high over the woods, searching for Yoshiko. From the roof he heard a voice calling him. Yoshiko was lying face up on the slope of the burning hot shingles above. She called his name in a singsong voice. He climbed effortlessly up the roof but it was like walking on slates over a burning furnace. It seemed odd that Yoshiko should be lying there.

Frightened, he looked around. The boundless woods were giving off the smell of fresh varnish and the motionless greenery was filled with the voices of cicadas like the lingering tones of a bell. The sun burned white and seemed to alternately grow large and then wither away. When he looked at Yoshiko, he saw she was barefoot. She stood up. She looked both as though she were swathed to the ankle in clothing and like she wasn't wearing a stitch – her flesh itself was chaotic, like a cloud, and it seemed she was waiting until she settled down. Only her face shone brightly like a wild flower plucked from her flesh, with such artificially meticulous detail it recalled a miniature.

"Fujimura, isn't that all right over there?"

Where she pointed, Akihide saw a strangely narrow metallic bed set on the peak of the roof, shining

unnaturally. As he gazed at it, not understanding what she meant, a stinging pain began in the soles of his burned feet.

He woke up. He couldn't move, he was so bound by fatigue. A moonless dawn as though the ocean were directly outside the screen. The shadow of a city train heading for Hyakumanpen went by. The emotions of the dream did not allow him to sleep again.

Great Uncle Ogiwara, who felt it was his duty to arrive before everyone else, was waiting at the Murasakino temple. Next to him, Akihide saw an unfamiliar short gentleman in a morning coat. For an instant, Uncle Akinobu also seemed to be at a loss.

"Oh. Mr. Yamauchi!" He seemed to force himself to believe it by uttering the words.

He introduced Akihide. "This is Baron Yamauchi."

The Baron looked at Akihide with a somewhat serious, wistful expression that recalled a doll's face.

"Your mother and father?" he asked.

"My father has not recovered from a cold..."

"Oh, a cold... what a shame. I am disappointed; I came thinking I might see him. Of course I have met you instead..." His greeting was lighter than one would expect at a first meeting, and Akihide perceived an overly generous sadness behind it. A type of sadness not seen within the Fujimura family. Was this person his father's friend? If so, why had he not once been mentioned by mother or father, or come to visit? The Baron now turned to his Uncle and began a long apology.

"I came to Kyoto yesterday for an appointment – actually I met with Shigehara to inquire about a legal matter. I knew it was pushing it to come like this without an invitation, but I came out of affection for the "old man of Takagi-cho"... I wonder, is this the fifteenth anniversary?"

"Yes, it is. He died in 1922 (Taisho 10)."

"Ah yes."

Akihide looked around at the temple rock garden and remembered his Uncle remarking on the way that the flowers in Kyoto were late this year. The moss shone as though from the bottom of a cold river. The Baron's excuses continued.

"I thought about bringing along my wife and daughter, but I left them at the hotel because I wasn't sure if other wives would be here." As the topic changed to family, Uncle Akinobu advanced the conversation himself for the first time.

"I heard that one of your children graduated at the top of the class from Gakushuin University recently. It must have been one older than your daughter?"

"Yes." The Baron blinked his doll-like, handsome eyelashes. "My eldest son, but he died last year. I have another boy who is younger than Kiyoko. I didn't bring him because he has school, though right now he's probably relaxing at home without his father around."

At that time the family of Akinobu's cousin entered the room leading in the old people from Tokyo while loudly imitating the Kyoto dialect. The baron pulled his seat over next to Akihide.

Akihide thought the Baron an unusual man – though he lacked the standoffish arrogance often seen in middle-aged nobility, but retained a vein of dignity no matter how servile and humbly he behaved. Somewhere in his persistence lay a fervency like the tones of confession. Clutching a Westminster in his paper-white fingers, the Baron spoke to Akihide in those same polite tones. His was a high, feminine voice, the kind you often hear in the waiting room of the House of Lords.

"When did you graduate University?"

"Last year."

"Oh? If I might ask, from what field?"

"Japanese Literature."

"Oh, how nice. I read the Tale of Genji avidly in my days at Gakushuin. Many find it trivial, but I loved it anyway. I think the fact that such a flowery tale began as an elegy was not only due to the influence of Buddhism, but also to some kind of deep readiness on the part of the author."

"Yes..." This was a little over Akihide's head.

The only reason he had studied Japanese literature was that he had wanted to be in Tokyo. His grades being good in Japanese, he had been flattered into it by his highschool teacher. In the University department, he found the honors students diligently trying to absorb and memorize such academic knowledge as the theory that *hinameshi miko*, appearing in the 49th poem of the *Manyoshu*, indicates Hoshi Taeko, and competing for seating order. He purposely chose the most tedious scholarly studies as his specialty.

"I too wanted to study literature, but I ended up entering law as my father had told me to. But Genji is wonderful. Not like people say." From the Baron's reminiscences Akihide suddenly had the impression that he had played around a lot when he was young. The Baron characterized that mixture of premature aging that the idle pursuit of pleasure will etch on a person's face and an odd youthfulness glimpsed beneath.

Seeing that Akihide was silent, Yamauchi sucked deeply on his cigarette and changed the subject. "So, your father has a cold. Has your mother been well?"

Akihide hastily shut himself inside last night's imaginary discord with his mother as though obligated to do so. His confusion, however, exposed the true nature of the illusion. The Baron's words caused him to betray his state of mind and innocently affirmed the anxiety he felt toward his mother while away on his travels.

"Yes, she is well."

"How would you like to come over to our hotel tomorrow? My wife is lonely -- you don't know how it would cheer her if you visited."

"I'm going to Kobe tomorrow." He refused firmly, despite feeling an inexplicable friendship for the Baron. The schedule he had improvised in order to escape his Uncle had become a law proclaimed from within, the most easily attempted dream experiment.

At that moment a Japanese painter who lived in Kyoto and a professor at Kyoto University were guided over. Obeying the instructions in his Uncle's eye, Akihide stood to greet them.

Finally, a young monk announced that the service would begin. An air of prosperity flowed from the direction of the main building. A myriad of altars glittered in the dim light and Akihide imagined the spring cold quietly enveloping his knees.

The service, the banquet, the row of ancient storefronts frigidly stagnating under the clear blue sky -- that night when Akihide got into bed and reviewed his impressions of the day, he was struck by the unexpected desolation. He was unable to arrive at a uniform impression. When had he become such a shallow person? Maybe the fact that nothing moved him was a precondition of the happiness promised to him.

Baron Yamauchi returned to his hotel around eight that evening. His wife was reading poetry under the light of a lamp. When she raised her head with its heavy, piled-up hair to her approaching husband, it was as though she begrudged him the poem she had only half read. The Baron suddenly felt a fleeting, groundless hope in his breast. But the face she turned to him was the same as always; her sloping eyebrows made her look as though she were constantly weeping.

As though confused, the Baron asked, "Where is Kiyoko? Did she already go to bed?"

"Mmm. Just now. She said she didn't feel well."

Forgetting himself, the Baron raised his voice. "Again this selfishness in Kiyoko! As if there exists a sickness with no fever! Sometimes I almost think she is doing it to spite me."

"Listen to you." His wife smiled unemotionally and with only a brief glance at her husband returned to the poetry. After a moment she said, "A while ago I saw those young people from *Town of the Heart*."

"They came to ask for your corrections?"

"No, they wanted to ask about the Tokyo Poetry Club."

She stood up and took out a box of sweets. "They brought these."

"What, Yatsubashi? Typical." The Baron put one of the hard fragrant cookies into his mouth. His look seemed very far away as he gazed out the window, as though he had forgotten his earlier upset.

His wife asked a question she had thought she shouldn't.

"How was it? Is Mrs. Fujimura the same?"

"Well, the Count and his wife didn't come to Kyoto. The Count caught a cold or something and so his son came instead... This was the first time I'd seen the old man's grave -- it's so much to his taste that one almost thinks he designed it himself while he was alive. The tombstone resembles the grave of Toshikyū at Daitoku Temple. The camellias were lovely, lying on the moss."

The Baron stood up and lit a cigarette. He pulled the window curtain and looked down on the humble streets of the poorly lit old capital. The scene was desolate, as the light of car headlights passing on the streets was thrown and then disappeared.

"If we want to view the flowers we have to stay another ten days or more. This hotel is awful. We should have gone to M Hotel as usual."

On the morning Akihide would leave for Kobe, his Uncle, reluctant to part with him, offered a

morning tea service in his prided tea room built at the edge of the garden. The scroll hanging in the alcove read "Is it the fox who hides to bother the children?" Akihide indirectly associated the quote with the days and nights of his childless Uncle and Aunt.

"Your father has absolutely no interest in tea ceremony, I know. I shouldn't say this about my older brother, but politics as a hobby... well, for ages the Fujimura family's interests have been too strong. As for famous politicians, there was really only Akichika Kyo at the end of the Heian era to speak of. Everyone else has been a dilettante. Of course I am one too... Oh, I just remembered – there was a newspaper article that criticized my brother's speech at the New Year's Diet – "Count Fujimura seems to think that a Diet meeting is a poetry contest. His own poems are in a style one might call indistinct." That's what it said."

The words of his Uncle, laughing as he continued, were painful to Akihide. "Sometimes I think that given our weak, vulnerable lineage, we couldn't survive if we didn't find some sort of hobby to live for. Maybe we Fujimuras would come to ruin if we gave up our hobbies."

Not knowing what to say to this, Akihide suddenly became aware of the fact that his Uncle, though suspecting discord with his mother, had not even asked about his trip to Kobe. His Uncle, as is usual with childless people, was unnecessarily cautious when dealing with other people's children. Thus, when the emotions awakened by Mrs. Fujimura's letter cooled down, he thought only about escaping the suspicion that had caused those feelings and the shackles on his heart. Seeing Akihide's relaxed and cheerful behavior at the service, he had decided that Akihide's weak nerves were all in Mrs. Fujimura's imagination, and had suddenly felt a special intimacy with the youth. Uncle Akinobu was the sort of man who felt closest to people for whom there was no danger he would be given responsibility.

Sensing the kindness in his Uncle for the first time, Akihide spoke unprompted. "I'm going to my friend's in Kobe because I want to make contacts for my studies, but if I am an imposition I will stay at an inn somewhere."

"Oh." His Uncle did not suspect this baffling statement, nor did he ask any questions. "At any rate, I'm disappointed. If you had three or four days more we could have gone together to the Toshikyu Memorial... it's so close, won't you come to Kyoto again?"

After Akihide left, his Uncle wrote a letter to Tokyo.

"You were worried about Akihide being a very nervous youth, but he has really become a wonderful, lordly young man since graduating University. I'm sure it is due to his good upbringing."

When she read this, Mrs. Fujimura must have looked quite puzzled.

Akihide got out at Kobe station as if it was his first step on an elementary school field trip. This was the first trip he'd taken alone in his life, and the first station he'd gotten out at without any plans or a hotel to stay in. He had never felt such a personal freedom, also seen as danger. It seemed that an intense yearning had been added to the blue of the sky through its reflection on the sea.

He asked about an inn at the station travel bureau. From the first, his Kobe friend had been a lie. Without a glance at the inns recommended by the man at the travel bureau, his eyes stopped on the Sannomiya Noh Inn in the southernmost section of the map. After boarding an old muddied taxi, Akihide wondered if he had picked an Inn by that name by chance. Of course it must have been the strength of the regional name Sannomiya. In Sannomiya the smell of Kobe Bay was even stronger than at the station. It seemed as if the bay was drawing him unconsciously toward it.

Noh Inn was a pleasant, rustic inn. The armor of secretiveness is easy to shed when hiding in the shadow of strangers. Probably his forefathers had also been grateful for the occasional pleasure of sneaking away from the troubles and rigidity of daily life.

When he'd settled in his room on the third floor, he opened the window and watched the coming and going of the trains. Then he busily took care of his ceaseless tasks. With the manliness of a youth who immerses himself in studies only for fear of the restrictions against looking around him, yet believes himself to be a virtuous student. He kept a three-day travel diary. He reorganized the name cards he had received at the service the day before. Mixed in with the famous artist and the Kyoto University Professor was another name card – House of Lords, Baron Yamauchi Munechika – which called to mind his Uncle's incredulous expression. He faintly regretted that he had missed his chance to ask about the Baron – his Uncle for his part hadn't said anything about him when they returned from the service. That carefree doll-like face, yet slightly melancholy. He arranged his half-read books on a shelf. *The Lily and the Sesame*, Arishima Takeo's *A Woman*, and *Poetry of the Middle Ages*.

Just after eight that night reading Ruskin, he heard a strange noise outside the window. An unnatural,

horrible silence remained afterwards, like when construction equipment suddenly stops. A commotion surged up as though a huge crowd of people were yelling.

He opened the window and looked down at the street below. A round area of the road, several meters in diameter, shined brightly under the streetlights like a stage. In the center was an exceedingly dark and stubborn unmoving lump. As though coming to the rescue, a beautifully shining car calmly pulled to a stop. The crowd wriggled like a snake, a circle of people jostling each other in an attempt to see the dead body. Akihide had not yet understood what had happened. The people were yelling in argument, but to Akihide the scene below still looked like a strange, unreal spectacle. He gazed at the cityscape with ordered emotions. It was only the lower half of the city that was sullied by the neon signs like an evil omen; the stars hung above in the quiet broad sky.

When Akihide next looked down, he could clearly see a policeman in the center of the crowd shining a flashlight on the face of the corpse. The vague, floating light danced over the body as though teasing it. The silence of those crowd members who could see the body, stretching their necks for a slightly better view, spread with oppressive speed to those far away.

Akihide saw in vivid detail (though he shouldn't have been able to from his third floor window) an eyelid like a seashell, stray hair, the blood covered mouth.

Who could sleep soundly on a night like this? He tried to tell himself the accident was only a coincidence. This makeshift method of blaming horrible events on chance had the reverse effect of bringing the accident out in relief. The same face, a vision of the accident victim, floated up out of the gloom innumerable times. His pillow burned like hot sand. He believed that death had climbed into his bed and lay with him. He had never felt death as animated and lively as it was that evening.

He felt the intense body heat of death wretchedly close to his own skin.

Akihide greeted the morning. He had almost doubted the rule that morning follows night, so anxiously had he awaited its arrival. Seeing the first light of dawn, he felt an abnormal cheer rise up inside.

"Last night's lack of sleep was very unusual for me. I must quickly regain some of my essential optimism. Perhaps going out for a walk will cure this sleepy gloom."

He left directly after washing his face. The sleepy looking maid who was sluggishly mopping the floor set out his shoes with a suspicious look. The shadows of the thin morning sun made the town look mysterious. The morning air brushed at his temples.

"Vestiges of last night's wind," he thought. "The overly dense atmosphere last night caused people to act strangely. Now it is fleeing away, transparent. Maybe that's why the morning breeze makes me feel so empty."

Retreating from the direction of the street where the accident victim lay last night, he chose a round about alley leading to the port. It eventually led onto a strangely distorted square. On a street leading down to the ocean from that square, he saw a narrow strip of the ocean like a stained glass window, the rest obscured by a tall Chinese restaurant. At a glance he couldn't believe it was the ocean. It was like a glossy enamel billboard. As he stood looking up, the intricate decorations on the Chinese restaurant shined merrily in the morning sunlight leaking from between the clouds.

The street suddenly began to wake up around him. Just as he began to descend the curving pavement by the restaurant he heard the lusty cry of a chicken from a strange direction. It definitely came from underground. A chicken was crowing underground? Accompanied by a hollow echo, the chicken's piercing cries continued. It sounded like one voice calling another, sending a message from the depths of the earth. Akihide figured it out. The room underneath the Chinese restaurant was the kitchen. The chicken, who would be slaughtered today, was undoubtedly tied in a corner crowing absurdly.

Still, this did not awake any particular concern in him. The ocean was what he was interested in. Where was it hiding itself? Though he'd come a fair distance down the hill, it was difficult to see the ocean behind the many layers of built-up streets. It was as though the ocean he'd glimpsed was the city's secret he had only spied by chance.

Finally he came out on a hushed shopping street. For some reason it gave him the impression of a cemetery. All the houses were sleeping with their shutters down and their darkened, secluded doors shut. It seemed that if the houses, with their moss covered bricks spattered by white pitch, opened their eyes for any reason they would suddenly crumble from the unendurable memory of their frightful hibernation. Thin white traces of brass polish remained on the brass letters of the signs hung on their lintels.

Passing the shopping street, he came out on a sidewalk lined with budding trees. The ocean was

unexpectedly close, seen through the freight cars on the harbor line.

As he leaned on a thick iron rail for connecting stern cables, he wondered why he had come and what he was doing. A swan-like foreign freighter was moored on a rope. Nearby was a gray freighter. Freighter horns sounded here and there like funeral taps. The gray surface of the ocean, the heavy water, and the stern, cloudy sky all seemed to threaten the awakening of the harbor. Occasionally, a launch lent an unsuitable cheerful beat to the scenery. Dull, oily water sloshed up and down between the many small boats tied to the dock. That sound – what had he been hearing? Was it the sound of the ocean? Or of the town? In fact the noise of the harbor line freight trains saturated the air. But across from them, or else on the surface of the water in front of him, (the area was so vast he couldn't tell) a dark, metallic resonance, a monotonous vibration as though someone were striking a metal plank, permeated every corner of the scene. Occasionally a comparatively loud noise rose up. The it was immediately swallowed up in that monotonous rumble.

Akihide, buffeted by the rich morning wind, felt that this scene was presenting some lesson. Above the ocean, seagulls dodged about like pendulums. An unstable color seeped into the air as the light tried to gush out from behind the piled up clouds. Was this the ocean he'd sought?

It takes time for us to notice big changes prepared for deep within us. We switch trains in our sleep, and only notice the transfer when we see unfamiliar scenery moving by outside the window. ...Perhaps Akihide was now looking at such scenery. But rather than looking directly at it, the scenery allowed him to peer inside. Maybe what he was peering inside of was none other than himself.

Timidly he tried to question himself. He asked: are you planning something reckless?

At that point emotions long forgotten clutched his heart. The emotions that had attacked on the day he had last met Yoshiko, when he had painfully witnessed her unceasing, feverish gaze directed at Miyake. Emotions which, though always close by, had not been so very intense until today.

Even so, it was disgusting how cleverly and meticulously he had followed a scheme. He had succeeded. Until now he had hidden these emotions from himself using all possible methods – avoiding them with the shrewdness of a fencing teacher, cheating them with the mastery of a con man, escaping them with the sensitivity of a fugitive.

Thinking back, he knew that a sweetness had always flowed at the bottom of those numerous deceptive emotions he had tricked himself about. Now he was rapidly reaching a conclusion. His eyes no longer saw the scenery. He was absorbed in the familiar immobile shadow within himself.

Defeated by his last meeting with Yoshiko, hadn't he single-mindedly wished for death, like a man crossing the desert searches for water in the intense aridity? He must have noticed that in that instant his love for Yoshiko had been converted to a longing for death. Hadn't those feelings that he had deceived himself about up to now by pretending to be unaware of them had another purpose altogether -- to engender this decision, sheltering it from the slightest wind? Maybe the fact that he felt a resignation so keenly – he felt resigned to the strength and familiarity, in other words the inescapability, of this decision – was due to this long extended deception. Moreover, the fact that death had taken a splendidly complete form, dazzling and independent, breaking the bonds of cause and effect as a flower forgets its period as a bulb in the earth, also lay therein. As it was free of spatial relationships as well, death was so close to him he couldn't see it as it towered overhead. It seemed like an invisible external power ruling his inner thoughts, a violent force inconsistent with himself and surpassing his own existence. That Akihide's instinct for tragedy played an important role at this point is incontestable. That tragic instinct had constructed death as though it were something unrelated through the medium of a subtle sense of shame, and had then ushered in that same death as though it had originated from some likely reason after piling up inanimate abstractions. (Such abstractions are frequently hard for humans to bear.) Perhaps that instinct wore an unpleasant satisfied smile while little by little it added a cruel weight to the territory it rules. Akihide heard the light footsteps of fate. All creation was serenely extending a hand, gently urging him toward death. Suddenly pride arose within him –he was fate's chosen one.

When he'd passed a half-hour in this kind of meditation Akihide noticed that the area had brightened up. The harbor lay in the calm light of an already high sun. When he looked up at the dry-docked sea freighters their white bottoms scattered the light. The sound of a nearby engine signaled that one of a row of small boats was headed toward the dock.

When he returned to the inn he ordered a long distance phone call to Tokyo.

Mrs. Fujimura's hurried voice, apparently startled by the voice of the inn's maid, came through.

"Where are you? Kobe you say?"

The healthy military tone in Akihide's voice when he answered was not only due to the fact that he was talking at the top of his lungs.

"Yes. The service went off without a hitch. How's father's cold?"

"He's all better. He went out for the first time today." She answered, slightly perplexed.

"I'm in Kobe for a brief visit with a friend, but I'm coming home tonight on the night train. Have a bath for me in the morning, will you?"

After this phone call, Mrs. Fujimura experienced an acute exhaustion and mixed emotions as after parting from a friend one runs into on the street after a ten-year separation. Being able to cause his mother such emotions was definite proof of her son's growth. For example, yesterday would Akihide have been able to say: "have a bath for me in the morning, will you?" Yes, this was surely proof of his growth. ...Now more than ever she clung to such thoughts.

The next morning when Mrs. Fujimura was cleaning up Akihide's study, ordering around the maid, Akihide overtook the elderly steward and appeared in the doorway. At the sight of him, Mrs. Fujimura recalled Akihide coming home from elementary school, flying into his mother's room still wearing his knapsack on his back. There was something novel in his appearance with the bright morning light in the corridor behind him that caused memories to well up. The son spoke to his mother in detail of his first trip alone. Mrs. Fujimura was not surprised that the tale did not once touch on Kobe. "I've never heard of a friend in Kobe," she thought. The name Kobe itself came to seem something immodest, some secret word she didn't know. "Of course, if that's the reason for his happiness..." thought Mrs. Fujimura, "then this one time I could let it slide." Purposely refraining from questioning him, she began to feel pleased to be overlooking his Kobe escapade for him. It was not a pleasure to be underrated. She felt a modest joy at unconditionally accepting her son's growth. (Yet she hadn't noticed the trap lurking behind these feelings. The type of emotion that accompanies the joy of love is definitely not love itself. It is an emotion that contains the greatest number of dangers used as substitutes for love. Later, she could not dismiss the fear that she had misused these emotions.)

Akihide had the feeling that his mother had noticeably aged during his short four-day trip. Face to face, all the illusions about his mother, especially the silly fantasy of discord, melted easily away. He thought it suspicious that his mother had not only aged but also mellowed a bit as compared to when they were on S Plain, but perhaps this was just another illusion. Perhaps the extravagance of his youth at S Plain had showed her up, for until then she had been frugal with her own youth, and forced her to spend herself in irritation. This would doubtless have simultaneously made her look somehow youthful yet confined her to a stubborn expression. However the youth in front of his mother now was like a cheerful old man whose youth has been bankrupted. Wasn't it possible that she could now rest easy and be even more frugal with her youth? Come to think of it, it may also have been an illusion that she had recognized the signs of Akihide's "growth."

Akihide purposely concealed his state of mind when he went to Kobe out of the anxiety he felt toward his mother. He did not know that his almost fatal sense of shame lurked therein.

At breakfast Akihide suddenly recalled the Baron and paused in the middle of his soup. "I met Baron Yamauchi at the services" he said nonchalantly.

At once Mrs. Fujimura's face turned the same color as Uncle Akinobu's had when he had caught sight of the Baron. "You didn't say so earlier," she said as though scolding him.

"I forgot." Akihide said uneasily.

The atmosphere was strange. It was as though an invisible dog had jumped up on the breakfast table. The Count endured the confusion by pretending indifference. Out of respect for his parents, Akihide did not pursue it. His parents settled into a false calm, but the Count's eyes clearly betrayed a desire to hear more about the Baron.

In the afternoon Mrs. Fujimura received the letter from her brother-in-law. "You were worried about Akihide being a very nervous youth, but..." According to him, Kobe was not the source of Akihide's cheer. Mrs. Fujimura was ashamed of her suspicions. Perhaps she used the excuse of seeking something from Akihide to compensate for the withdrawal of these suspicions -- immediately after reading the letter she visited Akihide's room. Once there, she cautiously asked Akihide about Baron Yamauchi, on guard against being asked why she wanted to know.

As you know, Akihide was an introvert. He was especially good at investigating his own heart, like a prosecuting attorney. He had that sort of enthusiasm for justice that frequently troubles judges.

In any case, he was aware of the deceptions in fairy tales. People who became thieves or resolved to

die for a reason and then ended up turning into totally different people: such is definitely storybook falsehood. For hadn't he actually become even closer to his original self through his own resolution? In other words, in his case the resolution had served to recognize emotions which, because they had not been in open usage before, had been distorted by various excuses and fictions. Since the decision, all his emotions were almost swaggering about. Seeing that his cheer, which had seemed only self-deceit, not only could not be wiped away now but was increasing, wasn't this perhaps also an odd effect brought on by his unconscious decision to die. Because in fact, his emotions before and after making the decision did not contradict each other in any way.

If we now analyze that strange cheer, the verve, the ability to let bygones be bygones that made Akihide look so healthy: they appear to have arisen from a childlike conviction. The feeling a child has of experiencing something he's only read about in a fairy tale; the mind of a mountaineer who becomes blind drunk with success when he's only made his plans; the spirit of primitive man who did not question an accomplishment wrought by spoken magic spells: in such a way Akihide was put at ease by a mere decision. Because of his certainty that he could die at any time now that he was resolved to do so, he did not mind the troubles of daily life, nothing annoyed him, and he could spend every day light-heartedly enjoying himself. He knew death for the first time, and like a man in love, he was floating on air. He did not realize that it was the proposition of death that made everything else seem only half serious.

Thinking it was about time to see old friends, Akihide visited the home of a schoolmate he hadn't seen in a year. Ever since the affair with Yoshiko he had decided not to answer any of his friend's letters nor to take phone calls, and had even pretended to be out when they came by. The lens which he focused only on love was extremely loath to scatter light on other areas. His secretiveness caused him to dread his friends as a cabinet minister dreads the press.

The rumor that he'd entered a sanitarium had made the rounds of his friends, but eventually people stopped talking about him. One friend hit the bull's eye with his report that Akihide was involved with a young woman, but this was immediately ignored, as it is only worth talking about other people's affairs if that person is always amongst you, providing entertainment. Some friends seriously thought that Akihide had died.

Two other classmates were at the house of Akihide's old friend Niikura that day. When the butler announced Akihide the three looked at each other and nearly shivered.

By the time Akihide entered the study, the atmosphere had become as fragile as thin glass, all three straining their ears. A dull person could easily have mistaken the atmosphere for one of welcome, as it was clearly different from that of repulsion. Akihide consoled himself by recalling that he had prepared for this situation.

Niikura stood and faced Akihide.

"So. You're alive."

Akihide pitied Niikura for the apologetic expression on his tense face as, just like in school, he sought to shake hands and tried to look surprised rather than curious.

"I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for so long. Actually, I went to the country for a while to put together some essays. Now that that is concluded I suddenly wanted to see everybody."

His friends were reminded of the old Akihide. As a boy, Akihide had often given this kind of unasked for account of his actions when he arrived late for a meeting or a party. "I just now was at a relative's house and then I went to a book store near them, and so I ran late" or "on the way I bumped into my cousin and he suggested we have some tea, so I ran late" and so forth. They had become so used to this kind of excuse that in general they paid no attention to it. Now too, his friends let it pass as they had before, and in doing so they felt as though they had seen him only two or three days ago. Though the three of them were curious about Akihide, they began gossiping about other old friends they hadn't seen for a while.

"What happened to Matsuoka?"

"What do you thin Ume Goro is doing?"

News of these people came rarely to Akihide, so he entered easily into the conversation. This put Akihide at the same distance from the estranged friends they were gossiping about, and gradually the three came to think of him as someone inside their circle. The talk paused, and as the tea cooled, they returned to an idle silence, unsuited to their youth. This silence did not bother Akihide a bit, as he could not distinguish between the scarcity of topics between people who haven't met in a long time and the scarcity of topics between people who see each other every day.

However, it seemed to the others that Akihide alone had a flourishing will power that rose above this spiritlessness. Though he was somewhat haggard, only in Akihide could no trace of the modern shadow on a

youth fatigued by pleasure not seen. "This guy is in disgustingly high spirits! And he used to be so introverted and quiet..." They all similarly admired his inner strength. No one doubted that the next time Akihide spoke, his would be the words of a leader. In this case, rather than death making him proud, his fantasy of death had a life force stronger than his friends' meager fantasies of life; thus it was only natural that it should make Akihide shine.

"Won't there be a chance to get everyone together soon? Not even one year has passed since we graduated, and yet everyone has split up..." Akihide asked this thinking that to visit each friend he wanted to see separately would be too conspicuous.

"There is. But it's a secret." Niikura flashed the reflection of his thick glasses at Akihide and smiled as though teasing him. "Lately, that crowd, they're such sticklers about everything."

The two friends looked at each other and laughed. They were amused that Niikura always happily added that pompous comment "they're such sticklers" whenever he told people about the club. The change in the listener's expression was a further interesting spectacle, because with his naturally honest expression, Niikura lowered his voice a notch for the complaint. Akihide immediately assumed the curious expression they were expecting. He was happy to obediently respond to the expectations and hopes of "people who will continue to live hereafter." This innocent pleasure seemed itself an omen of the ease which would be granted by death. However, he wasn't sure whether or not this was also a trick of the "maturity" which imitated "death." And wasn't his pleasure in those empty tricks perhaps one type of vague curiosity, which is actually proof of life?

In any case, according to Niikura, who continued talking without noticing any of this, the get-togethers were at Viscount Matsushita's club. When the Matsushitas had awoken from their empty grief after the anniversary of the loss of their dearly beloved only child the previous year, they had attempted to resurrect their dreams of their dead son through young people still living. Enlisting the help of Niikura, a good friend of their son's, they had decided to establish a club only for young people. The couple moved to a separate manor, and setting aside two or three rooms of the main building, turned it into a club. Membership was selective and fees were high. This was because in Japan there is no method of expressing one's nobility aside from wasting money. According to this uncivilized tradition, the Matsushitas reluctantly accepted the high fees, all the while protesting the vulgarity of it.

Dating back to past generations the Matsushita family had a reputation for operating strange businesses. A number of years earlier the illustrious name of the eldest Matsushita reverberated even among the masses. A magic show, held at the edge of Ueno pond in 1925 was the big business of the old Viscount in his later years. Standing up on a platform swathed in crimson velvet, the Viscount employed his erudition to offering exhibitions of traditional Indian magic. Ever since this had become a problem among religious circles, he had had to live in seclusion at his Atami villa, but how had he spent each day there? He passed the larger part of the day in an all-glass bath overlooking the ocean. Wearing his fur hat, he spent hours with his mistress, young enough to be his granddaughter, soaking in the colorful roman bath. As you would understand if you saw the many nests constructed on the glass ceiling, the fur hat was for the purpose of defending against the occasional droppings from the small southern birds that lived on the bath and flew freely about.

"What do you do at this club?"

"Nothing in particular. We young people just imitate the things that the old people do in their club. We play ping pong and tennis, drink western alcohol, 'chat', sometimes we dance..." answered one friend.

"If that was all, no one would pay the high fee." Niikura said, again looking pleased. "Matsushita and I have planned lots of things. For example, next Saturday we are showing the uncut version of that Czech motion picture that was radically censored when it was imported. Matsushita spoke with the Czech ambassador for us. The Saturday after that we're having a dinner for Ms. N, the pianist, and then she will play for us. And nothing compares to the booze at the Matsushita's bar... Oh, you should become a member right away. You can join if Matsushita agrees and you have the recommendation of three members. The three of us will recommend you! Of course, we'd rather not let in outsiders, so I'd prefer you didn't tell others about the club."

Looking at Niikura's face, glowing with the certainty that any good idea he had would necessarily be greeted with joy, regardless of that person's real feelings, Akihide was put in a bad temper. Niikura was so well-intentioned that Akihide felt ashamed of his own bad tempered feelings, and surely it was also a bit humiliating to feel that even his own death would not shake that good spirit. Actually, this was the first time he had thought about the effects of his own death. The effects of his decision had surprised him, but thoughts about the effects of his death made him feel insincere. He enjoyed imagining the club members, especially Niikura, see him die without any lingering affection for the club he'd just joined, and doubt the reason for

their club's existence. In this way people gradually extend a playful curiosity, the purest form of that boundless curiosity which is itself a sign of life, toward the territory of their future death. People can only portray death with the paints of life. With only the purest brushes of life. An innocent illusion of life that values only sport, can only recognize extremely frivolous things, playful things close to life, within death. In death, people finally discover a significance which childhood had also held. In childhood, all life is unified and raised to a form of pure sport.

Akihide, having become a new member at Niikura's hands, returned from visiting a former professor on a Thursday afternoon three days before that first Saturday meeting he had decided to go to, to see an unfamiliar Packard at the gate.

He went straight up to his study and straightened his shelves. He lined up the research books which should be returned to school after his death on one side. While he was tying a cord around the books, his mother entered without knocking. She spoke with a somewhat distant kindness, and he hesitated to look at her.

"Baron Yamauchi, whom you met in Kyoto, is here. He would like to see you. Won't you come to the sitting room?"

"Right away." He answered with an unusual coolness. Not out of bad temper, but because it seemed the polite way to speak to his mother at the time.

He opened the door to the sitting room. Baron Yamauchi and Count Fujimura were talking amicably in front of the mantel, decorated with an ancient rococo clock and an Okuda Saburo landscape. Mrs. Fujimura sat silently in a chair set slightly apart from them and compared the faces of her husband and her guest as though under a spell. Preserved in the dim gloom of the Meiji style room, the three seemed like characters within a frame. As though they had been painted into a picture at the hands of some ruthless artist: that artist's name would be Time. One could feel in their expressions some obstinate challenge to the keen eyes of the artist Time, for whom everything is transparent. Akihide hesitated a moment. The Baron turned his face in Akihide's direction. His eyes held a high degree of intimacy for Akihide.

Akihide sat in a chair next to his father. He did not miss the deep contempt in his father's eyes at that moment – an extremely courteous contempt probably meant for Yamauchi.

"Did you join Matsushita's club?"

"Yes, just two or three days ago."

"I see, I see." Yamauchi continued to nod his head up and down. "Maybe it is a strange coincidence. Two or three days ago our daughter joined too – we forced her to join – it seemed she would fall ill if we didn't give her some recreation. As it happened, my wife ran into Mrs. Matsushita somewhere a while ago, and after they had lamented together our mutual unhappiness over the loss of our eldest son, the talk turned to the Matsushita's club. She said there aren't even twenty members yet..."

"Why ever did Matsushita start it I wonder...?" Count Fujimura, who'd already heard the story, said in his Kyoto accent which came forth randomly every month or so. "Isn't it always his way to make an unprecedented amount of money, all the while complaining of his troubles, even when he has none? When you hear the details of this club, you find they're using the Niikura boy...it's just like Matsushita."

"His ancestors were like that. Every time they met people they spoke of how poor they were. They were really good at avoiding making donations. Every time they began a big business they would spread it around that they'd mortgaged the Zushi villa or sold some art works. In fact none of it was true."

"Of course. Well, Akihide. How about if you two go together as new members. Please invite Kiyoko if you would. I will tell her to wait for you on Saturday."

After the Baron left, Akihide remembered the strange expression in his father's eyes earlier. Meeting his father in the middle of the stairs as he returned to his study after seeing the Baron off, Akihide climbed in step with him. In a voice as devoid of overtones as possible he asked, "Why did Baron Yamauchi come by all of a sudden?"

His father turned suddenly, gripping the mahogany banister. He looked as if he couldn't believe his own ears. It was unthinkable that Akihide would question one of his father's visitors. Seeing the light falling in through the stained glass window of the landing brightly coloring his father's white hair, Akihide clearly understood what had brought his father to an abrupt standstill in the middle of the stairs. His father had interpreted Akihide's question as a clumsy expression of love by a son who has suddenly recalled his attachment to his father. His father, who did not question it but was only confused by this apparently random expression of love, was extremely pathetic.

However, the Count was blinded by his surprise, and the moment passed without wounding him. Because Akihide's motive, which even he was unconscious of, (and would probably have wounded the Count's pride had he discovered it) had caused this eccentric way of addressing his father and was connected to that instant when the Count had needed not Akihide himself but his only "son." The Count didn't understand this crisis, nor still more the fact that he had unconsciously urged on Akihide's question. The Count was still too arrogant to understand. Even the contempt in his eyes had perhaps been nothing more than one manifestation of the tendency of the nobility to hold everything they do not understand in contempt.

"No reason. He said he'd met you in Kyoto and wanted to take this opportunity to renew our old friendship. He was a friend of mine, and of your mother's as well."

Saying only that, the Count quickened his pace and climbed the stairs. Akihide continued to climb slowly, and after seeing his father enter his study, opened the door to his own. He noticed that the twine binding up his row of books, due to the late afternoon sun falling through the window just then, lent a fresh, unfamiliar tone to the room. A freshness calling to mind the beginning of a voyage.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ENCOUNTER

"Encounters promise more than an embrace can fulfill. In other words, an encounter belongs to a higher order of things in which many ideas are mutually conceived of bringing stars in their wake."

-- Hofmannsthal

It wasn't that Akihide didn't realize that there are occasional moments when one forgets a decision to die, though it had once seemed so firm. Perhaps it was an indication that his decision to commit suicide was leading to a natural death, as an inscribed polygon will approach a circle. Perhaps people can die without taking any action, by living the concept of death yet being oblivious to it.

For example, no matter how strong the decision to commit suicide, during life people can not see with the eyes of the dead on this earth even for an instant. No matter that an act is planned strictly for the purpose of dying, it is still unavoidably in the category of life. If you think about it, is not suicide, like alchemy, a futile attempt to create the gold of death from the lead of life? Has anyone in this world actually succeeded in suicide in the real meaning? Science still cannot create life. Accordingly, we can not yet create death. The attempt to make death using only life as material, takes no less intelligence than that of the scientists of the middle ages who thought they could make mice by mixing linen, grain, and cheese and letting it ferment for three weeks.

Thus, surely it is all right to entrust oneself to the hands of oblivion. Yet a character like Akihide's could not conceive of continuing to live (!) without some kind of purpose. Thanks to the crutch of this purpose, he handled his gloomy ancestral self-concealment and secrecy splendidly. His death purpose had come to serve as a skillful liquidator.

Please allow me a small mischievous pun. He is able to live up until the point he finally dies, thanks to this trivial thing, his "death wish." What keeps him from dying immediately is none other than this "death wish." Even the author must be grateful, because what allows the protagonist to live until the end of this tale is none other than the power of the author's own "death wish."

Just then a door opened and a young lady in splendid dress entered the room.

Just at the moment Akihide was stifling in the tedium surrounding Mrs. Yamauchi. As you know, the Yamauchi's daughter Kiyoko, just like Akihide, had become a new member at the Matsushita's club for young people. Thus, Akihide had been asked by the Baron to invite Kiyoko, whom he had never met, along to their first club party. When he went to the Yamauchi's as promised, the Baron was out and Mrs. Yamauchi, also a stranger, received him.

It was a boredom unrelated to the weather, not due to the rainy spring afternoon, a much more human boredom. After taking care of their introductory greeting, Mrs. Yamauchi simply asked him to wait a moment as Kiyoko was still getting dressed. Yet it seemed she had an odd talent for boring her guests with such opening words. It was probably that empress-like hairdo and those eyebrows which made her look like she wept constantly that granted her such a talent.

From questions on the scholarly research Akihide did in the University Japanese Literature course, she gradually guided Akihide to her specialty, poetry.

"I'm sure you are skilled at Japanese verse." She said, but was disappointed by Akihide's answer,

too clear to allow room for the suspicion that he was merely being modest.

“No. I can’t read poetry at all.”

“Oh. Really?” Mrs. Yamauchi looked honestly sorry for him. Her naivete turned Akihide’s boredom into pleasure in an instant. He started to listen without paying attention to her words. Doing so he felt her calm dignity – not a severe, but a rustic, nostalgic dignity.

Just then Kiyoko entered the room.

Mindful of their guest, Mrs. Yamauchi interrogated and cautioned Kiyoko on all kinds of silly things in front of Akihide, as all parents do. Kiyoko said nothing and turned red. Though she had the old-fashioned face of a sulky young bird, there were stubborn, almost bad-tempered, lines secreted around her mouth. Rather than detracting from her femininity, these lines granted to her face an unbecoming western flavor. Akihide recalled an ancient statue of a goddess he’d been shown long ago in the research room of a museum, a late roman statue made under the influence of Adia, with similar unpleasant, angry smile lines folded about it’s mouth. This sarcastic smile often appears for no reason on innocent virgins who don’t know themselves the meaning of their smiles. “She is excessively innocent.” Akihide observed as his first impression of Kiyoko.

Even her silence when they were alone in the car did not bother Akihide. He was bad with quiet girls, because placed alone with one he became awkward, fancying that he himself was boring her, and as a result did bore her more and more. But somehow Kiyoko’s silence was of a different type. It was as though they were sharing two silences. They were like two young siblings, each contented with the package on their knees allotted them by their mother.

Akihide looked out on a quiet line of store fronts on the road to the Matsushitas, a continuum of similarly aged signboards, and the rain on the even height of the buildings, with the feeling one has turning the pages of a tedious old book. In the opposite window, Kiyoko’s profile was in the foreground as she turned her gaze strictly outside. It was definitely a beautiful profile. Yet against the dusty street outside the window, her profile was turned into a cold, striking mask. Suddenly the simple street scenery ended. In the opening was an unexpected glimpse of blue sky. For an instant one almost thought it was the ocean. Under a break in the clouds, a watery blue came dripping down. It was as though a vivid cross-section had appeared while lining up the cloudy sky with the cloudy street. It was an empty lot, the remains of a fire where a corner building had burned down, and the scorched wooden structure could be seen.

The automobile sped up and the bright remains of the fire and the blue sky between the gap in the clouds raced by in an instant. Again the monotonous dark storefronts began to flow past. But in that instant, when Kiyoko’s profile was lit by a ray falling through the clouds the mask was stripped from her face. Akihide saw a defenseless expression appear, like that of the instant a virgin, alone in her room, making sure no one is looking, takes off her clothes and almost forgets her shyness while looking at herself straight on in awe. Then, as the remains of the fire rushed out of sight, that expression also immediately vanished.

“Oh! A fire!” He called out in surprise, though his surprise was not due to what his words indicated.

Without speaking, she turned to him suspiciously.

The car was already past the remains of the fire.

“We passed the remains of a fire on the side you were looking out.”

“The remains of a fire?”

She once again turned to the window. There, only the scenery of the old, dull street flipped irritatingly by.

What had Kiyoko been looking at up to now? Hadn’t she been looking at the scenery? Spurred by an odd irritability, Akihide gradually began to suspect that the blue sky and the remains of the fire had been his imagination. The rainy twilight that hung above and pervaded even the inside of the car was such that Akihide could only think it had been an illusion.

Upon seeing him enter with Kiyoko, Akihide’s long neglected friends greeted them immediately with teasing looks. Their mistaken conclusion caused Akihide to smile with malicious expectation. This small but definite proof that he was reflected in the eyes of others as a different type of person than he really was pleased him. It pleased him because this proof allowed him to behave freely.

Niikura, who had been consulting with the Matsushita’s steward, spotted them and approached, beaming. “It’s great, a great film. I’m seeing it for the third time tonight, so it’s no surprise to me, but I’m not sure if we should show it to the ladies. But if we send the girls home we can’t dance afterwards. I thought maybe we could get the lady members to cover their eyes during the film.”

Tonight they planned to show the uncut version of the recently imported and mercilessly censored

Czechoslovakian motion picture, which the Viscount Matsushita had borrowed directly from the embassy for the club members.

Though Niikura spoke only to Akihide, in actual fact his words seemed to be meant for Kiyoko. This was an expression of his characteristic effort to put himself in the safe position of “a good person,” especially in front of lovers, so that no one in his close knit group would feel jealous, and moreover so that he would be spoken of by all as “a good guy” or “a really nice person.”

“I agree. I heartily approve of eye-covering. An exceedingly good idea, your plan. Did you consult with Asano or something?”

Raising the name of their womanizing friend Asano, Akihide gazed admiringly at Kiyoko, who looked down, blushed and smiled as he repeated the joke. If I fall in love with this person...

He waited for a moment, flirtatiously expecting such a whimsical accident. In other words, frivolous flirtations were gradually developing just before death.

However, it was Niikura's smiling, friendly face, willing to pitch in and help at any moment, that gradually dampened Akihide's spirits even more than the nosy looks from his friends. When the film ended and the dance began, Akihide realized that Kiyoko too was bothered by Niikura's attitude. After two or three dances Kiyoko announced that she had suddenly remembered a former commitment and must go home. Akihide saw her to the doorway.

Since night had fallen the rain had gotten worse. Seen from the doorway, the rain puddles in the front garden reflected the lamps and shined a fierce white. The Yamauchi's car hadn't come yet. She asked Akihide to come with her while she went to use the phone. Akihide could hear Kiyoko's voice as he waited in front of the half open door to the telephone room. “Yes, but I suddenly felt like coming home.” Had it only been an excuse, the commitment she had spoken of before?

Kiyoko came out of the telephone room a moment later. “The chauffeur went to pick up my father first. They thought it was still early. They say my father is now at your house.”

“My house? ...then if we wait here we'll meet him.”

“Yes ... but I don't know if he will come or not.” She said, adjusting her bag roughly in her hands. “I'm going home now anyway.”

“In this rain?”

“I brought an umbrella just in case.”

“I ...”

Kiyoko waited for Akihide's answer. A woman's character comes out clearly in this type of situation. Kiyoko did not try to peek into Akihide's heart like other women would, whether out of good manners or a slight stubbornness. She waited outside the door to his heart like a dog waiting for his master. This put Akihide at ease. Let me take you home, he said.

The rain was intense, but there was no wind. The noise of the rain enveloped all other sounds and froze in the heavy silence. Water ran down the steep slope, shining under the streetlamps.

“We should have asked at the Matsushita's for a car.” Akihide said.

Kiyoko raised a damp white face. “But the train station is just ahead. We'll see it when we get to the bottom of this hill.” Akihide read only her excessive shyness even in this cold, monotonous reply.

On the platform Akihide met an old friend of his mother's. This old lady with an awkward looking leather purse dangling from her arm, the famous leader of a women's movement, would not smile on principal because it puts wrinkles on the face. After inquiring after his mother's health, she eyed Kiyoko and asked, “Your sister?” Akihide's answer was unnecessary as Kiyoko immediately turned red. “Oh, I see.” Feigning disinterest, the old lady nodded to herself.

Inside the train, having parted from the woman, the incident replayed itself countless times in both their minds. Exactly how did they look like siblings? No matter how they stared at each other, they couldn't see much resemblance. Was the similarity others saw a subtle similarity between the structure of their hearts?

Mrs. Yamauchi had gone to her parent's house for the night. Kiyoko forcibly detained Akihide, so he entered wait for the Baron to return. It seemed that Kiyoko wanted to tell Akihide something. Maybe that was the reason she'd left in the middle of the party.

Kiyoko opened a cabinet and took out a photo album.

She flipped through the album on the table and handed a loose photo to Akihide.

“Father said to give this to you.”

It was a picture of his grandfather's grave in Kyoto. Come to think of it, Yamauchi had had a camera slung over the shoulder of his overcoat. The refined grave in the picture was the stone chosen before

grandfather was born, but the focal point of the picture was instead on a charming camellia, which had fallen onto the moss in front of the grave. Though it was a fairly clear photo, at first it didn't look like a camellia, but looked almost as though someone had dropped a handkerchief on the moss. Noticing that the white of the camellia, which had fallen while still in fresh, spring bloom, was preserved by the dew in the moss, he felt he could even smell the quiet air of early spring radiating from the picture. He had visited the quay in Kobe, drawn by that seasonal fragrance. The picture foretold the invitation that early spring. Carrying this tragic brightness from far off on the brisk morning wind, or in other words, the picture foretold death.

Even if the Baron had ordered her to give him the picture, did Kiyoko have some sort of expectation of him now? Thinking so, Akihide raised his eyes from the picture and looked at Kiyoko where she sat on the sofa. Akihide had imagined her flipping quietly through the album, its weight firmly on her knees. But his abruptly raised eyes met Kiyoko's as though she had been watching over him steadily. Somewhere in her eyes was the glitter of a sorceress. Her eyes struggled like butterflies in the net that Akihide's eyes had thrown. When she finally escaped, she cast them down, filled with a humiliated darkness.

Akihide was not so inexperienced as to misunderstand this type of look from a woman. Having shown a painful innocence in his negotiations with Yoshiko that had cast him into his present catastrophe, he had now adopted the cheer and unconventionality of an idle, dissipated man that did not suit his actions through the frivolous, flirtatious feelings brought on by his decision to die. Expectation of a fluke had been a bitter, everyday operation when he was with Yoshiko; now it was a sign of his frivolous connection to life, his light-hearted appeal to life.

On a capricious whim, Akihide stood up, tapping the picture with a fingertip. "Are there any other pictures of the Kyoto service?" He asked, and sat down next to Kiyoko on the sofa where the album was spread.

Kiyoko fixed her gaze on each album page as though peering through a magnifying glass, because if she moved her eyes even slightly Akihide's face was right there. Occasionally she looked in the opposite direction toward the door as though she had suddenly remembered something. As though seeking a pardon from the stern door with its decorative carved grapes. At times their fingers brushed as they turned the pages. There were photos of Kiyoko's days at Gakushuin Women's College. Amongst them was a photo of her standing in the garden with a tall, beautiful youth. Akihide watched feeling gradually more sober as she hurriedly covered that page, and then added a long dull explanation about a commemorative photo on the next page before finally standing to return the album like a governess might put away a text book when the lesson was over. But she returned to her place, right next to Akihide. Doubtless because she thought it would be ungracious not to.

The two fell silent. It was definitely not the comfortable silence they had shared in the car on the way to the club. They awakened to this silence many times, and each time discovered it surrounding them. Like sick people disappointed each time they wake up and find they are not yet well.

Suddenly Akihide pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his lighter with a ridiculously exaggerated flourish.

Immediately a pained expression appeared on Kiyoko's brow. In order to save her the trial of saying something when she had not yet made up her mind to do so, Akihide placed his cigarette in the ashtray after only one drag. The atmosphere was as tense as that during an operation. He nudged Kiyoko's shoulder with his own. Then he groped blindly for her hand and clasped it.

***No matter how great the pain caused by protecting one's chastity, surely no act bearing real joy can fail to bring happiness. The fact that Kiyoko was innocent is not an explanation. Innocence at such a time should release a sparkle of innate wisdom. What appeared on Kiyoko's brow as her hand was held, was a pain even more certain than before, unrelated to any pain caused by joy. A pain that could severely wound a man's pride.

I was mistaken, Akihide thought. It was not "I love you" that she was trying to say. How stupidly I've acted!

Akihide did not escape to anger as another man might have done at such a time.

He was as afraid as ever of being wounded (though there is nothing more ridiculous in a person who has decided to commit suicide.) Hurriedly, he escaped through the notion of his flirtatious mood preceding death. It was especially necessary now to emphasize this concept.

Kiyoko suddenly pulled her hand away and stood. She looked as though she were wracked with guilt. Her lips were distorted prettily. If at that time the rustle of her father returning had not approached, she might have knelt before Akihide.

However the rustle quickly neared, and the Baron's voice loudly giving orders to the maid came through the door.

The Baron should have noticed Kiyoko and Akihide's slightly strained expressions, but tonight the Baron could not be daunted; he wore an armor of good spirits and was fearlessly prepared for the arrows of any disgrace. Before him, Akihide felt small.

"How nice! Though it's still early. We'll send you home in the car, so please stay as long as you like this evening." Then to the old maid, who brought in tea, "is Munehisa in his room? Tell him to come out to meet our guest."

Eventually Kiyoko's younger brother came timidly to the sitting room with a shy, fragile smile. Munehisa, who had just entered his fifth year of middle school, was awed by Akihide, eight years his senior. When Akihide approached the subject of horses, Munehisa became voluble, like a student given test questions on something he has studied well. He had a high voice much like his father's. Among the horses Akihide had liked and ridden, the pure white Asayuki and the bay Hakui had both died, and now the most popular was Murasakio from the main stables. Munehisa went to the T club stables every week as a member of the riding team.

"His late older brother hated horses more than anything. Though he did every other sport." The Baron said from the side.

"Oh, he went to athletic meets, didn't he," Akihide recalled. The Baron's fearless good spirits tonight had forced them to speak of the dead eldest son whom they'd never referred to before. Akihide did not go out of his way to suit his manner to their misfortunes; he let the Baron's words flow over him indifferently. His delicacy touched the Baron deeply. He threw a look of admiration for him at Kiyoko as though requesting her to agree. Kiyoko, who had remained silent until then, mistook her father's look for mild criticism. Doubtless he was urging her to add to the conversation. When Munehisa heard her take the initiative and tell about the motion picture and the people they had met at the Matsushita's, he could not help but be surprised. He had not heard his sister talk so much before a guest in several months. Her false cheer in the situation also silenced Akihide. He was slightly amazed. It had all been a one-person Sumo match. Thinking it foolish that only he had harbored exaggerated emotions, Akihide responded to Kiyoko by talking about the ridiculous outfits of the people they had seen at the party, and even laughed. The Baron's mood became better and better as he watched the pair, grinning broadly. He believed that Kiyoko's depression would somehow be cured, thanks to Akihide Fujimura.

At breakfast the next morning, Akihide's mother was for some reason in a very bad mood. Akihide felt that his mother's bad mood was the exact reverse of the high spirits of the Baron the night before. Come to think of it, that quality that made people feel sad which the Baron had had when they'd first met in Kyoto, had been missing in his generosity of spirit last night.

In contrast to his mother, the Count spoke intensely to Akihide about the new French general in the morning paper who had been a young teacher at the military school where the Count had studied abroad. When Akihide got ready to go out, his father offered unexpectedly, "well, then I'll accompany you half way."

When they were outside, the Count walked along looking helplessly high-spirited.

In the meantime, if you think that people like Akihide, who did not try to meet the unforgettable Yoshiko, and did not even send her any letters, don't exist in the modern world, the author must explain. (Though if Yoshiko's capricious cruelty were to give but to a gentle regret when Akihide went to visit, perhaps the old passion would return to her.) It looked as though his nature was true to itself, but that wasn't the case. For most people, as long as they appear consistent in the eyes of others, it doesn't matter what contradictions lie within. Akihide appears to be faithful to himself because he tried to be consistent inside, even while his secretiveness hid things from others. But in reality one would have to say the opposite, because as a result he abused not only others through his vanity, obstinacy and maneuvering, but even himself. The reader has seen Akihide's ambitious efforts to be true to his heart in detail. The decision not to see Yoshiko was not the conclusion of these efforts, it was the preface. His lifestyle was based entirely on that decision and proceeded from there. Just as we don't "recall" things that we have never forgotten, all of his actions were viewed from the point that he would not see Yoshiko, and so if her were to think he might meet her, he would have already taken a step away from her. This one step would be extremely difficult. Yet this one step might be his only chance of escaping his love for Yoshiko.

At any rate, a new love had begun. The ivy and the garden grass had come in a fresh green. It seemed as though the lawn was lifting up the sharp-edged garden stones.

He spent the beautiful spring evenings inside the house. Doing so, he understood the deception that had spurred him on thus far. On one of those days Niikura visited him.

Niikura was the type of person who couldn't rest until he had gotten to know a friend in all aspects of their life like a member of the family. He was beloved by cheerful and inhibited people alike. Since his school days, he had always been surrounded by a group of followers, though there was no particular hero-worshipping. If one of these people said "Niikura, please excuse me, today I have other plans," on the spot, Niikura would reply good-naturedly, "have a good time with Ms. Karuizawa. But please, don't stay out all night." The Who's Who edited in his memory was surprisingly complete. It seemed that only his own page remained a blank sheet.

Therefore, Niikura's opening question was in the usual vein. "That was a pretty girl the other night. You hide yourself for half a year and just when we are wondering what happened to you, you make an impressive appearance! When's the wedding?"

"Don't be silly." Akihide suddenly flashed a smile that brought to mind that of a sick person.

Niikura, who took this smile to mean that something had gone wrong between Akihide and Kiyoko, purposely feigned ignorance and continued his inquiry with a compassion that wounded Akihide.

"Anyway, tell me all about the last half year. If there's anything you want to talk about ... anything at all..."

"There isn't anything to tell."

Pressed little by little into a corner, Akihide became a bit giddy and suddenly thought maybe he should speak frankly about Yoshiko to Niikura omitting details. Niikura, unequalled at being moved by direct confession, would grasp Akihide's hand, cry with him, and then jump up to go have a talk with Yoshiko, never having even met her. Doubtless Yoshiko too would be moved and would come to him. Crying!

Thinking thus far, Akihide returned to reason. What a foolish thing he'd almost done. He was driven by fear that the craziness would return.

"Excuse me a moment." He stood and went downstairs, hurrying to get away. At the garden door he called out "Mother, are you there?"

"Aki? Do you need something?"

"Niikura is here. He says he'd like to see you, it's been so long."

When Niikura saw Akihide return with his mother he understood that the discussion had been cut off. "Like a child, calling his mother," he thought, and became a little angry with Akihide.

Only when Niikura called who came to visit the most often of all Akihide's classmates, did Mrs. Fujimura greet a visitor lightheartedly. Niikura had a special talent for dealing with his elders. At school events it was usual for him to be in charge of reception, and at University as well he was very good at receiving older professors. He loved this talent of his, and had no small amount of interest in watching its brilliant effects. It was hard to guess his age given the maturity of his actual behavior and the youthful way he pursued his talent with such interest. As expected, only the slightest displeasure toward Akihide remained in the expression Niikura turned to Mrs. Fujimura.

"Your mother is the same as always?"

"Yes, she's too healthy for me." He made fun of her for being a so-called "celebrity," no time to even warm a chair, feverish with work for the Women's Nationalist Club. Akihide always felt, though faintly, a gap in his friendship with Niikura when he skillfully divided the topics he brought up with superiors and with friends. Neither Mrs. Fujimura nor Akihide had heard his gossip before. Strangely, it seemed that town gossip was leaked first to business families like Niikura's before nobility like the Fujimura's. Actually it was only because in contrast to the way Count Fujimura kept such topics to himself, in the Niikura household rumors were purposely exaggerated.

After he left, Mrs. Fujimura turned to her son and smiled. "An interesting person. And he is really keeping up with you. He will be of help to you in the future."

"It seems Mother had the same idea as me," Akihide thought secretly. "The same thing all his friends think when they look at him."

Suddenly he realized that what had filled him with the desire to confide earlier had only been the charm Niikura radiated.

Since last summer, the Fujimura's travel habits had almost completely been abandoned. They did not

go to the ocean and trips to the country became rare. Travel is like a business enterprise. Mutual trust and animated enterprising spirits, all turned to the same purpose, are necessary. In travel, the heart is invested instead of money.

It seemed that with Akihide's unfulfilled love a boundary between them, Akihide and Mrs. Fujimura were both unconsciously headed for solitary travel. Everyone tacitly recognized the situation. The fact that travel was suspended for a while was both the cause and the effect of a strange change in the Fujimura family.

Green leaves sprouted on the branches of the trees. The twigs were as though wrapped in green flame. Count Fujimura was invited to go fishing in the Nagara River. The invitation was for the whole family, but Mrs. Fujimura said seeing it once was enough, and didn't go. The Count set off with his friends from the House of Lords fearing a vulgar welcome by the region's Governor and influential people.

The next day Mrs. Fujimura and Akihide ordered a cloisonné vase at a Ginza clock store for an acquaintance's wedding. While there, a small refined gentleman pushed open the door and entered while talking about something with a young boy wearing a Gakushuin uniform. It was the Baron Yamauchi. A little behind them was Mrs. Yamauchi.

The two family groups exchanged greetings heartily. The Baron sat down next to Mrs. Fujimura and chose a watch for Munehisa. "He loses them often, this boy. This is the third one since he entered middle school."

Munehisa turned bright red as everyone laughed at him. When the shopping was done, all five rode to a Chinese restaurant in Hibiya in the Baron's car at his suggestion.

Settling into the car, Mrs. Fujimura asked suddenly "where is Kiyoko today?"

"She's resting from a slight cold." The Baroness answered simply as though to avoid touching on it further.

While they waited for their food, Akihide gazed at his mother as she spoke warmly with Mrs. Yamauchi. Her talent impressed him. How different she was from his mother of last summer when seen before others like this. Which one was real? The two women spoke of nothing in particular, and when the Baron occasionally added a word, Mrs. Fujimura's answers to him held the same degree of triviality and was delivered in the same manner as when she spoke with her lady friends. Was she carefree? Or was it the opposite? In any case, compared to her awkward manner the first time the Baron had visited, her behavior now seemed a lie.

"What's the schedule at the Matsushita's next week?" Though he had not lost his usual courteousness, the Baron asked this with such frivolity that Akihide was shocked.

"A recital. Mr. Ohata's daughter."

"The so-called violin genius. The whole family are geniuses. The grandfather was a genius girl-chaser, the father a golf genius, and the uncle a genius for borrowing money. At school there wasn't a single friend of his he didn't owe money."

However, walking down Ginza on the way home that evening, Yamauchi returned to his sincerity and whispered to Akihide. "If you have time, won't you stop by sometime soon? Kiyoko is resting from a slight cold, but as long as you come by I'm sure she'll get better."

Akihide took this show of faith with a light heart, though an ordinary young man would probably think it a heavy burden. His resolve to die had taught him to make light of the thing people call "destiny." It was not destiny, it was nothing more than the suggestive function of the force with which the environment impacts on people. Naturally, Akihide was now free from all things like destiny. The people around him only bound his shadow when they intended to bind him. He stood aloof and chose his fate with his own hand. People have no way to decide themselves other than by choosing their own death. When they choose life, they only grasp a multitude of "other." When Akihide accepted Yamauchi's trust, he was happy to realize he did so lightly without being burdened by it. A happiness one might also call the vanity of death.

While Akihide was thinking about this, the Baron turned around and entered a clothing store. He said he had to buy a tie. Akihide exchanged a few words with Munehisa, again the same sort of discussion of horses. When he looked up it was to discover that, oddly enough, it was not Mrs. Yamauchi who stood next to the Baron facing the mirror and layering various neckties on top of his own, not only drawing close to his face to give some opinion but matching up ties on the Baron's breast with her own hands, but instead his mother. Mrs. Yamauchi was staring blankly out the show window pulling her sulky eyebrows together. In the window a round flower-shaped plate with a compact riding it turned round and round on its electric stand.

His mother peered into the mirror where she could be seen as well and laughed like a young girl.

"This pattern is fun. You look ten years younger. If you have the nerve to wear this pattern calmly

then there's nothing you can't do. Definitely."

He set out alone to the Matsushita's party on Saturday. The young members were killing time before dinner by gossiping and in one corner playing chess. He joined the gossiping group surrounding Niikura. Even in this club, relaying detailed information in addition to general knowledge of sports and Hawaiian guitar was the secret to arousing respect in the girls. Excess experience lended a subtle rank, and regulated their organized society in levels. They idealized insincere charm. The young ladies discerned the tastes of their male friends, and when a sigh of truth was heard behind their masks of insincerity, they smiled with a mixture of cruelty and cheer and withdrew feigning ignorance. Eventually they came to think of these men as children and married older men whom until then they'd only glimpsed from afar.

"The genius has yet to appear." Said Niikura.

"She's pompous. Just wait, she'll arrive at dessert time and make some statement like 'I had to rush here from another recital.'"

"She doesn't know that everyone was forced to come tonight, does she? Just to show her let's all clap ten times in unison at the count of three when it's time to applaud."

"That would be a little extreme."

"Well, her pretensions to genius are perfectly fanatic, so it's just right."

Just then the door joggled slightly. "The genius has arrived."

But it was not Ms. Ohata who entered. It was a thin artist nicknamed the Skeleton. His eyes, dazed by the change in lighting, made him look for an instant uncannily like a real skeleton.

"We thought it was the genius but it was the Skeleton."

"Same difference" a cynical youth replied straight-faced.

"So, you went to Nara?" The well-informed Niikura asked.

"Yes. To the Horyuji. I stayed in the Nara Hotel. In the afternoon Professor K trapped me, and at night I was afflicted by newlyweds. When I got back to Tokyo I'd lost seven kilograms."

"Newlyweds shouldn't have bothered you in a hotel."

"Ah, but it was a disgusting couple. Playing piano cheek to cheek in the lounge, whistling as they passed arm in arm in the hall. Even went to the bath together. Then they got in a boat, fooled around too much and flipped over – turned into a couple of loving wet rats. It seemed like they didn't sleep a wink at night and didn't wake up until afternoon. But they tipped generously so the hotel didn't complain. The final straw was when they were kissing on the narrow garden slope in the shade of a shrub, which could be seen clearly by everyone. It's probably going on even now. When we finally fled the place they said to please come again as though they owned the hotel."

"Did you know the guy?"

"I know of him. Miyake of the Mountaineering Club. The girl was some delinquent named Harada Yoshiko."

Yoshiko's name was somewhat unknown, even to his friends who'd memorized the name of every single recent female graduate of Gakushuin, because she was younger than they. Thus, she transcended their narrow school related realm, and regrettably not one of the group was familiar with Yoshiko's brilliant name.

Akihide, thinking himself splendid, endured this shock without the slightest change in expression. His inherent secretiveness had never before had such an audience. He could feel his knees shaking but it was only his mischievous nervous system, unrelated to this emotions. He had such reserve of strength that he could even elaborately form that ticklish, comedic expression those enduring pain wear onto his own face. He was conscious of the pain as a physical presence, as people who have been shot are aware of the bullet inside their bodies.

While standing there, he felt the part of him that wore the carefree face he'd created gradually split away from his real self and start to float airily away. He tried to restrain it but it continued to strip off. Left with no choice, he tried to force another carefree face on himself. The process repeated itself again and again, and the demented faces with the thin crooked smile, those carefree faces which had stripped off, crowded around him, watching over his futile efforts with voiceless smiles.

This narrow self-concealment, which seemed for a moment to have succeeded, began a dazzling division, a spiritual stalemate close to madness. He could no longer hear what the others were talking about. He had no alternative but to cling abnormally to the increasingly trite, fixed ideas we call "reason." Scattered therein were absurd, inconsistencies like "another person's wedding is a ridiculous reason to commit suicide," and "committing suicide as a direct result of another person's wedding is one of the most sublime human self-

sacrifices.”

“I’ve had a slight headache for a while. I think I’ll say goodnight.” He whispered to Niikura the lie with a solemn countenance. Niikura agreed that his face looked a little pale, and tried to clasp his hand in parting, but Akihide did not respond, unwilling to let him feel the trembling of his hand.

When Niikura showed him to the door, his eyes suddenly opened wide. Akihide, who had until then been pressing his hand to his forehead with an extremely gloomy expression, had in parting stared straight into his eyes, and flashed a sudden awkward and inscrutable smile.

He stubbornly insisted to himself that even that smile had been based on a minute conscious calculation. On the other hand, calculations should have the obvious purpose of seeking a solution, yet that smile seemed to have no purpose. Awareness cornered him and pursued in retrospect his each and every action. Perhaps his each and every action had been against his will. People used to call the conscious pursuit of unintentional actions by the name of the god of death.

When he finally reached home he went up to his room, giving the servant some irrelevant excuse. He was in no mood to write a note or order his books. It was odd. What ruled him was really only an unbearable sleepiness. He felt only the impatience of a child, who endures sleepiness, finally returns home from outside, and hurries to his room to snuggle in bed. He lay prone on his bed and buried his face in the pillow.

After a little while he was wide-awake. He realized that it was not really sleepiness he had felt, but death. Natural death. Death by drugs was probably no more than a clumsy copy of it.

Again he pulled out the sleeping pills he had taken from the drawer and gazed at many times before. He lined up the small white pills on the desktop. Disappointingly, the pills did not cause any new emotion. As always, they were an expressionless cold white – their form held no attraction. Surely death should turn your head the instant you see its face, like a tryst with a long lost lover. Surely these pills, unable to arouse his appetite, did not have the capability of granting a person death.

He decided to wait a while and then look again.

He walked to the window and looked down on the garden. The light from the window fell upon the lawn. The coolness of the glass he leant on chilled his forehead. This sense of cold, an unmistakable sensation, acted as a go-between for various resurrected sensory desires he wanted to satisfy before he died. A crowd of them.

One innocent voice, innocently sly, muttered “I want to see Yoshiko’s face just one before I die. Just one word, I want to say just one parting word.”

Hearing this voice inside his own heart, he shuddered with pity, like a father for his prodigal son. How miserably pitiful if all of his hopes which had hung until now on his death were no more than camouflage for the wish to meet Yoshiko. He could not easily kill this prodigal son in its present condition – it would definitely be necessary to chastise it beforehand. He thought of methods of chastisement. He had to inflict on himself something so serious, something incorporating so many lessons it would be absurd.

There was one such method. To go and say goodbye to Kiyoko as a substitute for Yoshiko. He had felt so few pricks of conscience, no shame or even remorse concerning that night when he had grasped Kiyoko’s hand, that he suspected there was something spiritually lacking in him. They had shared an odd sympathy that day. There had been many moments when they had not needed words. Wasn’t that because he loved her as a sister? The fact that they had looked to the old woman’s eyes like brother and sister illustrated the quality of their love excellently. There was definitely also a feeling like concern for a sister.

The fact that he felt almost no reluctance to part with his mother and father was probably because love makes people spiritually calculating. He only needed to compensate for his unfulfilled love.

He felt that if he met Kiyoko he could die in peace. Tonight he would be patient. Resigned to the fact that, like a schoolboy on the day before an excursion, he would be unable to rest, he lay his head on the pillow and immediately fell asleep. He was surprised when he woke in the middle of the night.

Oh, of course, I haven’t died yet, he thought.

People who try to commit suicide often appear to others as though they do not take death seriously. On the contrary, Akihide was skilled at treating death straightforwardly, within the limits of his own understanding. There is a thin line between shallowness and frivolity. However, there is a difference, and it must not be overlooked. Normal people who want to continue living, see death as an “alpha” added to the limited range they understand. This alpha is no more than a simple safety valve, but Akihide thought that an abyss lay therein. Though of course this abyss may lurk in the very shallowness and buoyancy of the thoughts

of one who decides to commit suicide.

After Akihide had set out for the Yamauchi's the following day just past noon, the Count suddenly returned home.

The Count had set out the night before with the intention of returning home, but at the insistence of a friend, he got off the train at Atami, and spent a night of generous hospitality at a hot spring, the pride of the villa. It was the Count's habit never to make plans or to let his family know when he was coming home in order to leave his travels as free as possible.

The traces of the cheer of a thoroughly tired out traveler still remained distinctly on the Count. It mostly spread an agreeable atmosphere between travelers and the people who greet them.

The Count received the butler's report on Akihide and his wife while still standing in the entryway. "Mrs. Fujimura was called out to the family center for Mrs. Motoda's birthday party. The young master went out to the Yamauchi's."

"Oh. I see." Meek from disappointment like a child, the Count did not step into the house. On a whim he said, "I have somewhere to go. Tell the chauffeur not to put away the car."

He returned to the car without even having taken off his shoes, and ordered the chauffeur on to the family center. On reflection he became annoyed by the childishness of his own behavior. Even if he allowed the childish whim of going to meet his wife, what did he intend to do while he waited for the long women's party, just now starting, to end.

He ascertained on the bulletin board in the lobby that the Duchess Motoda's party was being held. He then ran into the elderly Baron S, the personification of tedium, and they lunched together. When lunch was over, the Count tried to give the slip to the old man, with his stink of mildew and his myriad of wrinkles folded between stiff collar and bone, but the Baron, who would probably record in his diary that he had snagged a valuable conversation partner, would not be easily shaken off. Likely, he was a heavy drinker. The Count was forced to go with him to a bar facing a little garden on an alley.

It was a murky room clouded with the smell of tedium. Glowing brilliantly, the lawn outside the terrace made one feel the thick gloom of the bar all the more. The old Baron had the strange habit of sloshing his tongue around inside his mouth and coming in with the exclamation "Ah!" before he spoke. It always caused the fastidious Count a pang of disgust as it resembled the sound of a parrot's dried tongue being moistened. The old Baron wanted to hear all the current political news and as the Count's answer was not satisfactory, the Baron triumphantly revealed his own vast newspaper knowledge. Count Fujimura grew tired of the whiskey, which as usual did not agree with him, and peered through the tortoise shell colored glass toward the light. The room, reflected in a clipped out rectangle, shone through in a melancholic, stagnant color. The Count gradually began to feel that the atmosphere here was familiar. The lonely old men buried like mushrooms in the surrounding easy chairs should have been more familiar to the Count than youths in their twenties. The Count did not need to ask himself which age group he was closer to.

The Count parted from the Baron with a kind wish for his health. He intended to go home without waiting any longer but when he got his hat from the coatroom, he heard a commotion from the stairs. The sound of laughter and the soft scuffling of feet on the carpet. The party had just ended.

Mrs. Fujimura was coming down the stairwell at the head of the crowd, and saw the unexpected figure of her husband leaning against the coatroom. One would have to say it was extremely rare for the Count to come to the family center. He must have had some urgent reason to come without even resting from his travels. Suddenly a pained shadow passed over Mrs. Fujimura's face. "Doubtless he came home, asked where I was, and doubted me. He's suspicious of Yamauchi and I." It is unclear whether or not the fact that Mrs. Fujimura's thoughts flew so quickly to Yamauchi can be simply assigned to chance.

Mrs. Fujimura greeted her husband without smiling. Then she stood by his side as expressionlessly as a police escort of the utmost coldness. Those among the women coming down who knew Mr. Fujimura glanced curiously one after another at Mrs. Fujimura's face as they greeted him, which was now so disagreeable it was as though she'd changed into another person.

"There has definitely been some sort of quarrel between this couple" they all thought, and then loudly greeted him as though to deny it. The heavy silence which remained after they left was enough to make the Count wonder if such a quarrel had actually arisen.

He could not guess the reason for his wife's bad humor. The Count's playful face, as he suggested there had been an emotional quarrel among the women, looked more and more cunning to his wife's eyes, and did not help the situation. Once inside the car on their silent way home however, an oppressed look finally appeared on the Count's face too. He felt that he had nothing to compare this open hostility between them to

other than an undesirable memory going back almost twenty years.

The Count found that he was transferring the hostility he felt toward his wife onto Baron Yamauchi because of that unpleasant memory. The fact that the Count had begun to hate someone meant that he was gradually moving from his stable arrogance toward a dangerous humility.

In the meantime, Akihide had been led to Kiyoko's bedroom. It was a single room on the second floor with light drifting about like the reflection of young leaves on a pool. Kiyoko sat on her bed leaning against a pillow.

By chance, memories of the night Akihide had returned home with her and grasped her hand were glimmering in front of her like mosquitoes flying noisily in her eyes. Her attention caught by this, she forgot Akihide was there and her body seemed ineffective. She was afraid that he would dwell on it and apologize, on the very day she had finally resolved, like Columbine, never to rely on anyone anymore. It was a mystery to her why she had let Akihide into this room when she feared that so much.

Even before Akihide saw Kiyoko's face, as her body shrank from embarrassment, he had begun to doubt the meaning of coming to part from this girl. Behind the decision to visit Kiyoko instead of trying to visit Yoshiko, was an impossible, fairy-tale wish that Yoshiko, not Kiyoko would be waiting for him when he arrived at the Yamauchi house. The childish resentment that that wish would not be realized made it difficult for him to bear the situation. The strength, which had spurred him on last night, had disappeared. He attempted to shirk his responsibility. From the outset, he rushed to make an insincere statement, which would fulfill his responsibility. He wanted to behave like those irresponsible authors who are only able to write conclusions.

He spoke in a monotone as though reading from a book. "Excuse my recent rude behavior toward you."

To Kiyoko's ears this sounded like an abrupt speech meant to cover his shame. Having waited nervously for this apology, the thing she had feared most, as though for thunder to pass, she could only see this sudden apology as the lightning, which comes before thunder. She almost leant forward bodily in preparation for his next words. But Akihide only closed his mouth and gazed at the strange brightness of the young leaves in the window.

Kiyoko's expression, as she feared that he would say today what he would have proceeded to say that strange night he had grasped her hand if he hadn't stood so quickly, looked Akihide as though she were half fearing and half looking forward to some kind, sympathetic words. He was jealous of Kiyoko's faultless innocence even as he lightly hinted at a parting. A fleeting jealousy of people who waited for others. Jealous of Kiyoko, or of the other Akihide who was reflected in Kiyoko's eyes as the man who loved her.

Frightened to wait any longer, Kiyoko was forced to prompt Akihide with a reply more unheartfelt than any words she had ever spoken before.

"Oh, really. I think it was I who was rude." She unconsciously exaggerated her guilt toward Akihide because she herself found this reply so insincere.

Her words, though sarcastic, reached Akihide's heart because he could no longer accept anything but broad, false emotions. Stealing a look at Kiyoko's white throat, soft as a lamb, he suddenly felt pity for this girl. He decided to leave behind a gentle impression for her sake.

A light breeze was coming in through the window. "Is it getting you?" Akihide stood up to shut it, and watched a city train, glimpsed on and off through the trees, racing eagerly through the far end of the green woods. It seemed a scene that would be lit up as a memory even after death, and would reflect in the eyes of a dead man no differently than it was seen during life. Therefore the quiet scene called to his heart as the exact opposite of a memory.

Kiyoko was seized with angst while he stared endlessly out the window. Perhaps the strong smell of fresh leaves outside the window had been damned up. Randomly, with the innocence of one waiting for her echo, she asked, "What are you looking at?"

"I'm watching the train."

"Oh." She laughed rashly, feeling relieved. She was, in fact, relieved. Just when she was fearing a confession of love he'd innocently confessed to "watching the train."

However, this sisterly laughter angered Akihide. It was selfish to think that her laugh was an insult to his resolve to die, when he had hidden that resolve from her. He was like a child who continues to diligently hide his love for a girl, but immediately gets angry when he hears others insult her. It seemed this bad humor would rescue him from the awkwardness of parting.

"Well, take care." He said hurriedly, without looking at her. But his voice trembled. "I'm leaving."

"It's still early. What's the matter?" As she tried to sit up, someone knocked on the door. The maid entered bringing tea. They focused the nasty looks they were unable to throw at each other on the maid. The young servant grew frightened and left the room.

They sipped the tea without speaking. Akihide felt the smooth heat flow down his throat and had an odd thought. Won't these sensations also be lost tonight? He looked at Kiyoko. Various incoherent desires whispered to him. Her strong pure beauty made it clear that there was no danger any of these would be realized. Placing his cup on the saucer Akihide looked at the clock on the shelf.

"It's already four?"

"Oh, that stopped yesterday."

He looked at his wristwatch. "It's not yet two."

This time Kiyoko did not detain him. Surprised by his piercing gaze when he looked at his watch, she was suddenly aware of her nakedness beneath her robe. She realized it was somewhat mad to let Akihide into a woman's bedroom.

Even so, her own unexplainable boldness on the day Akihide had grasped her hand now seemed a mystery. She had been like a shrine maiden that day. Enticed by a great power, she had encountered Akihide and recognized some kind of tacit agreement with him. In that first glance she had been certain she could confide to him the pains of her heart, difficult to confess even to her father and mother or her girlfriends. Though Akihide had misunderstood and impertinently grasped her hand, meeting Akihide again like this on the day she had decided to rely on no one but herself, she had to think that in fact her secret thoughts were related to Akihide.

But what was this strange expression on Akihide today? Having put his teacup down he was staring at he nails. Then he looked at Kiyoko as though from some far away place, and asked abruptly "How old are you this year?"

"Nineteen." Strangely unsurprised by this eccentric question, Kiyoko replied honestly as though under a magic spell.

"Oh." He stood as though forgetting what he'd asked and looking once again at the clock said, "Oh, that one's stopped isn't it. Well, I'm going home. Take care."

They both laughed with forced cheer, wondering how many times this instant would be remembered later on. If Akihide had then returned home and committed suicide as planned it would have been proof in the one area that had any meaning that there is a strange, clown-like waste of beauty even in the power of the god which manages human action.

Because at that moment, Kiyoko, very consciously and clearly, her eyes half shut, her heart torn by the horrible fascination one feels when both aware that one exists inside the ego and that one is now crossing out of the ego (yes, she too had collided with her consciousness and traced each and every one of her unintentional actions), called out after Akihide.

"Goodbye. We shan't meet again. By tomorrow morning I won't see you again alive."

Akihide listened to these words with his mouth hanging blankly open, as though he were having a revelation. "Kiyoko discovered my plan to die." He could interpret her words only in this way. Development of the human power of imagination requires much time – on the spur of the moment people are constricted by the poverty of their powers of imagination. Intuition is dependent on negotiation. It is unrelated to real imagination.

At that instant Akihide absurdly felt only the light-hearted emotion of mixed disappointment and pride, as lovers might feel when, after conniving to keep their passion a secret until the wedding in order to increase the impact at the wedding dinner, the secret is leaked to society beforehand. This indicates the shallowness of his thoughts on death. It was proof that he was intimate with the meaning of death only to that extent.

With wobbly steps, he returned to Kiyoko's side. Then, both hands shoved into his jacket pockets, he looked down at her on the bed almost haughtily.

"Please pretend you did not know of my suicide. You were born to meet such a happiness you'll almost tire of your long life. It would be more suitable for you to pretend to know nothing of suicide."

He had intended to say something appropriate in an appropriate manner. Ignoring the fact that it was unreasonable to believe she had discovered his suicide plans, it was a mystery why she would speak of it in this way, just like a naïve thief would confess to his crime without having been questioned. Under the influence of death, he assumed a supernatural premise. He made that common, transparent statement unconsciously, under the illusion that anything obeying that premise was common knowledge in society. The side of his

suicidal psyche that rejoiced over things, which obey normality, had a share in this.

"You jerk. I don't understand you at all."

He was mistaken to think that Kiyoko had suddenly started crying. Hanging her head, she was struggling to suppress a laugh in the shadow of her hair, spread out like a fan. "No one asked to be allowed to die with you. It is I who will commit suicide."

It was absurd. She said this in a childish attempt to hear the detailed particulars from him.

"What are you saying? I'm the one committing suicide."

"I wonder if we ever promised to do it?"

"To die together?"

In that instant, even though Kiyoko did not yet know that Yoshiko had prompted Akihide's decision to die in a similar way as the brutal youth Saeki had abandoned Kiyoko and prompted her decision to die, the mutual announcement of their plans caused her as much joy as a confession of love. She answered, brimming over with happiness.

"Yes. We met. We promised this in a previous world. If we had separated today, dying wouldn't have had any meaning. (Oh! You must have seen that man Saeki on the album page I hurriedly flipped past who caused me joy and pain at will. I'll never stop loving him in this life. Once I understood clearly the value of love, I could no longer endure the waste of being alive. Dying is not a waste of life. Dying is frugal. I want the existence of miserly, bad-tempered rich old maid because of Saeki. I will die waiting for the day when the stinginess of my love, even if it demands death, caused his ruin.) The necessity of hurrying toward death, with no time to lose, has disappeared. Like the flowers and fruit, which ripen and fall, the time will come when we too will advance toward death, commanded by the seasons. We know the true value of illusion better than anyone else. The world will see in us the illusion of happy first lovers, lovers who will only be thought to have died together of excess happiness. This mistaken illusion will be as empty as the illusions we embrace, and for that reason eternal. Ultimately, you could say they are one and the same, couldn't you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

A CAREFUL CONSPIRACY -- I

"Our hearts became two fires, and inside our two hearts that double light – reflecting in one mirror."

- Baudelaire, Death of the Lovers (La Mort des Amants)

Upon returning home, Akihide learned that his father had returned and went to his study. The Count offered his son a chair, and glanced briefly at him before speaking.

"What do you think of the young Miss Yamauchi?" He continued immediately, as though he put little weight on Akihide's answer. "Perhaps it is unnecessary for me to say anything, but it would be best to leave as few problems for later as possible. For when the question of your marriage comes up as well."

After saying this, the Count's expression visibly eased. Akihide sensed, though vaguely, that there had been words between his mother and father. Though his words hinted that a marriage to Kiyoko would be blocked, he seemed to bear no bad feelings towards Baron Yamauchi.

Having spoken, the Count realized it was not at all his real opinion. Apparently, it was necessary for him to first undergo self-hypnosis in order for something to be his opinion. He casually changed the subject to his trip to Nagara River.

Akihide had reason to think it suspicious. His father had given his permission to a marriage with Yoshiko without asking for any information at all. Having gotten his permission, his mother had immediately visited the Haradas. Compared to his past indifference to the household, the change in his father who had also walked halfway to Professor Nozoe with Akihide a few days ago, should have been a clear indication of his love, but the fact that it had led him to embarrass Akihide with a warning...

Mrs. Yamauchi also came to visit the Fujimura's one time. Their conversation in the living room, looking out on the overflowing wisteria trellis, was mostly about poetry.

When she had finished writing out a poem for Mrs. Fujimura, Mrs. Yamauchi said again "You have talent. Really, please keep writing I will introduce you to Professor Sakaki."

Mrs. Fujimura tried to escape to the topic of her family. "Has Kiyoko's health improved recently?"

"She's gotten much better. Thanks to her friendship with Akihide."

"Oh, was he of help?"

She was proud of the fact that her son was endowed with an extraordinary ability to make girls forget

their sorrows and pain (even if it came from bad morals). However, it was not a motherly pride. The reader probably saw this dangerous bud in Mrs. Fujimura when Akihide returned from Kobe. Since the Yoshiko incident, when he no longer confided anything in her, she had begun to see Akihide as a mature adult accumulating necessary experiences. There were many times when she understood that her duties as a mother were over. Taking this for granted, she overlooked the painful wounds caused by things only a mother finds out. She thought that her son was becoming independent of her, but in reality it might have been she who was growing independent of her son. She'd been saved by the subtle influence of Baron Yamauchi.

Little by little the roles of Count Fujimura and his wife were switching. The days the Count spent at home seemed to increase. The servants, sensitive as pets, tried to feel through their bodies which direction the environment they lived in was flowing all of this lent a strange tension to the atmosphere.

Akihide started to commute to the research room. He maintained the arrangement of his bookshelves as indifferently as ever. As it was the season when they opened the windows at night, the corpses of moths who had strayed in through the cracks in the screen door could be seen occasionally amongst the shadows of the books. It never changed in this room; the smell of dank books swirled about like stagnant river water.

Let's cast a glance at those bookshelves. One could not call them abundant. On top of them were quite a few paperbacks in a row. Most of them were bought for high school classes, and one could not perceive the traces of any special taste. The fact that there were comparatively more books of Japanese literature perhaps indicated that the path he chose was not completely whimsical. There were also a bunch of Arishima Takeo novels.

Reprints of Earl M's collection occupied the top shelf. The shelf below by various other collections. These were wrapped in a cord, as he had left them after straightening up the other day.

In the corner, an entire old Sorinshi collection could be seen. The marks of plenty of reading were apparent in the Meiji style leather binding.

Books on Japanese literature research and criticism occupied the top two shelves of the next bookcase; it is unnecessary to note details. Underneath, a variety of books were piled untidily. It seemed he had no liking for philosophy – one counted only a few translations of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. How had he fit those in? On a shelf still further down, were dust-covered European and American travel books, patchy travel essays, and commemorative seal books. Throughout, there were very few foreign books. It was clear that he bought and gathered books outside of his major only in imitation of or at the suggestion of friends. In a separate glass case, the Fujimura family's antique books were displayed.

Next, let us turn our eyes to the wall. A Chavanne his grandfather had collected in his later years and had loved more than anything else hung there. Underneath was his grandfather's small landscape. It was childish, but it was a work he had painted under the apprentice to the artist K, and it pleased him. On the opposite wall hung a portrait of his grandfather in middle age drawn by an Englishman. His peaceful gaze was slightly averted from his own works in embarrassment. Whenever Akihide felt the desire to see it, it was enough just to think about those eyes. Next to his grandfather was a picture of his young, goateed father in his army days, sitting in a chair and striking an easy pose. Except for a somewhat glamorous satin sheet, there were no other decorations.

Akihide's desk seemed both messy and neat. A pipe rode atop carelessly piled photo albums. Opened letters lay about whitely like tree bark. There was also a strangely congested feeling about the desk. Half-read books placed at various angles conveyed an annoying tension via the acuteness of their angles. From the window an excess of transparent rays of light were thrown on top of this. It gave the scene the feel of an etching.

The author has purposely avoided details while referring to the pattern of this room. The room lacked any of the hobbies a youth usually enjoys. The owner had not tried to add anything to it. At a glance it looked plain, and was, in fact, quite bleak. It resembled the room of a criminal who does not want to leave behind evidence.

Can we call Akihide lazy because he neglected study, exercise, and hobbies? Maybe he was born only for an extraordinary love. Though seasons were lacking in his lifestyle, unbearable changes in temperature and light visited abstractly. His fantasy made the room bleak to the core.

It was as if the room had been undermined by termites. The ghosts of his fantasies quietly continued chewing sawdust in hidden recesses. Akihide was changing into a symbolic character – odd idiosyncrasies lacking in individuality and dependent on inactivity and powerlessness. He did not even have that safety valve, a "hobby," in his life. Excessive idleness mingled with excessive desire. For an individual like Akihide, daily

events do not even appear in his tragedy.

With a light heart, Akihide began to commute to the research room. By marrying daughters to various feudal lords, the Fujimura family had come to lead a life of rare wealth in the imperial court of the Edo period. Akihide's great grandfather bought vast amounts of land in Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration. The fact that a miser had a squanderer for a son and a squanderer had a miser for a son is sound proof of lineage. Upon the death of Akihide's grandfather, who had devoted himself to collecting art, his extremely realistic son – namely Akihide's father – succeeded in cleverly disposing of the collection by donating it according to his father's last wishes. There was no need for Akihide to reconsider his lifestyle. The Count thought it would be fine if Akihide studied and enjoyed himself for two or three years before getting married and taking a teaching post at a suitable school. It would not have concerned him at all even if Akihide had stopped going to his research department altogether.

Niikura often visited Akihide's department, and Akihide also went to visit Niikura. When he arrived, Niikura was usually peering through his glasses at an original document in fine print, arguing loudly with a friend.

Akihide frequently visited the Yamauchis on the way home from the University. If Kiyoko wasn't in, Mrs. Yamauchi received him.

"You quite resemble my late son." Sometimes her words chilled him. With the bluntness of a bereft mother, she was wont to draw connections between Akihide's fate and that of her late son's. But only warm maternal feelings lived in her heart. She quickly began to compensate for the loss of her son through Akihide.

One day, Akihide visited the Yamauchis and had his usual inexhaustible discussion with Kiyoko. When he started to leave in the evening, Kiyoko said she would take a walk and see him partway home.

Exposed cliffs and red pine forests still remained here and there near the Yamauchi house. City trains occasionally passed on the tracks under the cliff where few people walked, shaking the air of the depressed city streets. The sun was sinking on the other side of town. They stopped on top of the cliff to watch.

The village roofs were drenched with the color of muddied crimson – the setting sun dripped intense red light in unexpected places. A row of houses cast a cutout shadow on the streets. Akihide felt that an extremely cruel ceremony was being carried out here. An avaricious will from within the freezing silence sparkled forth from the setting sun. He would regret many things he would leave behind after he had passed. He was like an invader. Brandishing flashes of light like Medusa's hair; he seizes everything he can take by force, and leaves. All creation trembles in fear and prostrates itself before the vicious conqueror. He feels a rapture of the utmost tension as everything within himself is mercilessly robbed by his own hands flashing nobly with a proud and poisonous beauty. – Immediately it was drowned in the night.

Akihide shivered in the surrounding silence. The sound of a train echoing from far away sluggishly disentangled itself from the silence. The sunset began to fade. Here and there street lamps were lit. Kiyoko stood at his side, absorbed in the warmth of his silence. That suggestion had doubtless made Kiyoko think of the same thing as Akihide. Suddenly Kiyoko turned as though the twilight had woken her. In a high voice she called out her brother's name.

Munehisa, passing by, turned with a dazzled smile. He was wearing boots clouded with dust and holding a whip in his hand and appeared to be returning from the stables.

"Are you going home?"

"Yes." Answering his sister briefly, he politely greeted Akihide.

Munehisa respected Akihide because of his sister's love. What was it like to have the power to make someone love you? At Munehisa's age, love had become an adhering fear surpassing his vague urges. A beautiful older woman at the horse club he had thought about secretly had recently married and no longer showed up. Whether due to a presentiment of her marriage or a change in the woman herself, near the time of the wedding her beauty was so stupefying he had almost hesitated to look at her head on. Earlier, he had fancied a friend of his sister's who used to come by, but he had not even had the courage to send a letter. It seemed that all his school friends had a lover, even allowing for some exaggeration in the talk. From what first step does love begin? If it was simply coincidental, then there was no reason why it shouldn't happen to him too. He had to admire Akihide. That strange ability to heal the sorrows of his sister, who had been so depressed she didn't even respond to medicine. Now she was nice to the family and cheerful day in and day out. She behaved more like an older sister to Munehisa than ever before. Perhaps all lovers were wisely discreet with their methods of employing love.

Munehisa's dazzled eyes unwittingly caused Akihide and Kiyoko to garb themselves as lovers. It was almost a habit. But was the costume complete? They had gradually come to feel like different people when

they were alone together as compared to when they were in front of others. If they wore costumes, they must have had real clothing as well. When they appeared before people, they became true lovers without a bit of effort. At times one entered the other's heart, and as a lover, could even view their two figures. This capability granted a mysterious happiness to those who witnessed it as well.

Munehisa realized that compared to his sister and Akihide's love, in its ultimate purity, the adherent fears he himself harbored were low and inferior. It had become all the more difficult for him to speak to Akihide.

Parting from Akihide, Munehisa and Kiyoko walked back toward the gate. Feeling that if he didn't say something now he would regret it later, Munehisa spoke.

"When I think about it, I see that my life is very monotonous. I don't know what I'm living for."

Kiyoko understood immediately what Munehisa was trying to say.

"Because you don't understand why you are alive, you can keep on living."

Of course, what she wanted to say was "Fujimura and I found out exactly why we were living, and now we are going to die. Maybe moment by moment is the best way to live."

This was the first time Munehisa had heard such words from his sister's mouth. Moreover it was just a trite epigram. He was disheartened. There was no reason for him to listen to such words from his sister. Suddenly he saw a sarcastic smile he was not accustomed to flash on his sister's mouth in the twilight.

"Ms. Yoshino mentioned what a nice person you are." Hearing the words of the girl he had not had the courage to send a letter to through his sister, he made an unexpectedly savage expression even before his cheeks could turn red. He was afraid that his self-conceit would be wounded through a childish, incomprehensible joy. He walked with his head hung low and did not answer. He felt the heat of his ears angrily. When they came before the gate, a dog barked from behind it as though calling to them. The smell of green leaves made the darkness stifling.

Kiyoko felt a renewed sadness as she watched her younger brother pull off his boots. There had been empty flirtation in her sudden desire to tease him. Had death dissipated her? Taken advantage of the hollowness of her heart after parting from Akihide?

Mrs. Yamauchi was waiting for the two of them in the dining room. She did not try to ask the reason they were particularly late. She spoke happily of the crayfish on the table. Thanks to his mother, Munehisa relaxed and his cheeks became even redder. He thought guiltily that it had probably been his own words, disturbing his sister's quiet love, that had made her unpleasant.

What in fact did Akihide and Kiyoko discuss during their frequent meetings/ Serious and trivial, worthwhile and useless, all were discussed with equal indifference and esteem as though equal in value. Akihide talked in detail of his Kobe trip: the unfortunate accident below his window and his revelation in the harbor. Thinking back now, that trip was like a dress rehearsal for death. Akihide recalled the face of the dead man painted with ugliness and fear, a face he'd no actually see, and tried to talk about it. At some point, the fiery visage changed into a scarlet rose with a thickness and complexity as though engraved in shadow via a skillful revision and carving technique.

Death was now their ally. At times, death waited on them, quite like a faithful servant at their side fulfilling their every wish.

One day in jest Akihide showed Kiyoko the sleeping pills he had recently bought. Kiyoko took them artlessly in her hand. They were already far from withdrawing their hands timidly from poison, or a fearful choked-up childishness like the awe a poor person has for a jewel. They had appropriated the indifference of the millionaire who leaves real diamonds spilled before the make-up mirror.

Akihide thought while he looked at the sleeping pills Kiyoko treated as an innocent toy. They were not poison they were just sleeping pills. However, increase the amount slightly, and they will kill you. People who take them, fear that outcome more than anything. What stinginess! Those people, who do not hesitate to work life too hard, would probably say that the cautious and serious attitude with which Akihide and Kiyoko manipulated death, was both ludicrous and pathetic. "Life is my racehorse, so I know how to manipulate it. I also know how far I can push it. But death is an untamable, unruly horse." People are faithful to their preconceptions, but is their racehorse really life? Maybe the horse they ride around blindfolded is really death. Kiyoko returned the pills to Akihide, a quiet dimple in her cheek. Then she took out something folded in beautiful brocade from her bottom drawer.

"It's a sword handed down in our family. I intend to use this." Akihide unwrapped the brocade and saw the gold Yamauchi crest. It was delicate ornate woman's dagger. He removed the sheath. The air around it lost color in its shine. What Akihide saw when he suddenly raised his eyes was Kiyoko's soft white throat.

He could not stop the trembling in his breast. Her throat had looked beautiful to him on that day he had come to part from her. He repeated an equation he couldn't solve. White throat + silver sword = blood and death. Somehow red is born from white and silver. Hadn't she miscalculated?

Kiyoko raised determined eyebrows and gazed radiantly on Akihide's surprised countenance. She looked very proud, like a martyr. Inside of her, one more structure, which Akihide had been unaware of until now, showed itself. As though a noble Buddhist temple had appeared standing on the horizon in the sunset.

The almost primitive strength which allowed Kiyoko to decide to put such a heroic weapon to her own throat was the very thing Akihide was waiting and hoping for. He was even jealous of Kiyoko, whose ego smoothly and effortlessly sheltered within her such strength. After all, Kiyoko was a woman. Women were the ones who casually conceived of something and remained faithful to that conception. Her expression of pride originated unbeknownst to her. Akihide felt he wanted to kneel before her in order to bestow some traces of this thinking onto himself.

Every time they met they talked untiringly. It was not necessary to discuss their death plans in detail. They could entrust that to the hands of their servant, death. Death would discern the tastes and proclivities of its master. Death would measure time precisely with its long hands. Death's special talent was manipulating the schedule in such a way that its master would not notice.

Their talk moved by itself to tales of their lovers. With neither shame nor envy they talked over the histories of their strange loves and the unforgettable traces repeatedly. Tears ran from their eyes as they spoke. Soon Kiyoko disappeared from Akihide's eyes and Akihide from Kiyoko's. They entrusted their hearts to each other without reservation and mourned.

Eventually, Kiyoko and Akihide looked at each other's face, sparkling with tears. Like shape and shadow, the smiles of those tired out by a mysterious joy rose on their cheeks like twin tides. They discovered unexplored territory in their smiles. Both felt that the other lived inside of them. Though the lover's costumes they wore before others seemed to them like separate characters, in fact they were probably being guided along a similar course.

Kiyoko had not met Saeki for one month, Akihide had not met (MISSING!!!)

Of their mistake was the reliance on words. They had neglected their mutual supernatural powers. They practiced relating the portraits to the other's heart through revelation. Thus, gradually the two fantasies became shared possessions.

When Akihide and Kiyoko were in a room together they frequently experienced the illusion that they faced Saeki and Yoshiko. At times Akihide even felt he was talking to Yoshiko, and Kiyoko to Saeki. It was as though Saeki's coldness and Yoshiko's caprice had been forgotten. They behaved perfectly.

The rainy season continued. His friends diverted themselves during the ennui of this dark season with rumors of Akihide.

"Again he's disappeared. That Fujimura."

"Really? He came to my place the day before yesterday. And I hear he's going to the University."

"I heard a rumor that he's always over at the Yamauchi's."

"Don't they go well together."

"Everyone says that, but two introverted people together..."

"They'll be all right. Fujimura has unexpected self-confidence in some areas."

Niikura listened to this dialog with a glum look. Well-informed people often look glum. He summed it up in his usual manner.

"Actually Fujimura is the one more agitated, and she is rather unwilling, don't you think? Not that I have proof. I just have that feeling."

Everyone listened closely to his official view.

Since Akihide would not leave Tokyo at all, even when summer came, Mrs. Fujimura was able to indulge her own disinclination to leave Tokyo. Count Fujimura did not thereafter say another word about Akihide and Kiyoko's affair. When Akihide got used to this he was relieved because he believed his father was coming to love him more and more. The air of a son getting used to his father leads a household toward loneliness.

As the summer grew long, the Fujimuras set off for their Gora villa. The Yamauchis alternately used their Ooizo and Karuizawa villas, and as it were, this year was the year for Karuizawa.

Summer calls forth a slight romantic ardor in silly modern people. Though only planning to part for a short period, they feel romantic. As though a process that could achieve things which seem almost possible lurks within summer.

Summer is composed of the immaturity of spring and the decline of autumn. The year before last, when she had spent the last summer of her school years here, Kiyoko had bashfully first known extravagant joy, as though happiness was eagerly awaiting her in the shadows like a seducer. She had not yet seen Saeki. That year, desire had brushed softly past her as a gentle breeze. A girl of that age is an aristocrat. She lacks nothing. It seemed all she had to do was wish, and anything at all would be granted her on the spot.

Now after two years, it was difficult for Kiyoko to be surrounded by the same people and families all summer once again. The surnames of many of her friends had changed. They had all become friendly and relaxed. Most of her friends were those of before, but the young girls who passed on their shiny bicycles like a school of fish were not the same as those of two years ago. The girls two years ago were already aware of their purpose. They were quickly leaving behind the conceit of the arrogant maiden who doesn't want to be anything but herself. Now they were foolish enough to idealize the style of waiting for a stranger's words before becoming aware of themselves.

One day, when the Yamauchi's arrived at luncheon at M Hotel where they were staying, a certain Mrs. A grasped Kiyoko's hand and offered her congratulations on the engagement. The poor Japanese of Mrs. A, who had been born and raised in France and was of mixed parentage, added an innocent directness to her words. Baron Yamauchi was not one to be indifferent to such a disquieting misunderstanding. Yet there was the slight shadow of frivolity in the Baron's explanation that the engagement was a groundless rumor.

Kiyoko had never before shown such embarrassment in front of her father. When Saeki had come visiting, it had almost scared her how much courage she possessed to cover her own shame. Yet now her ears and cheeks began blazing of their own will, as though they were not hers.

While Mrs. A apologized abundantly, Munehisa tugged at his sister's sleeve.

"That's R over there in the corner."

The fat comedic actor R, a stand out in his red tie, could be seen talking to a graceful companion. Without thinking, Kiyoko smiled indiscreetly, Mr. and Mrs. Yamauchi exchanged glances.

As they had promised, Akihide and Kiyoko did not exchange any letters. Various inequalities and changes in the form of the love between two people are born through the exchange of letters. Compared to the illusion that the connection is broken and tied by the arrival and absence of letters, their decision made their connection stronger. It exempted them from the power of "time" which ages all. Love letters, when overexchanged, ages the lovers' spirits so much that their joy when they meet after a long separation also cools. Sending consistent letters even after you commit some light betrayal is quite convenient in order to believe in your own purity. Beautiful, perfect loves built on mutual love letters, realize the instant they meet that the images are empty. Ill-humoredly, they see more direct inner desires that shrink from being expressed by words, not the passion they expressed in their letters. – A gray morning comes, and as they try to suppress the farewell to passion which wells up like nausea when the cold air separates one partner's breast from the other's, half asleep, they think of another woman or another man they saw on some street corner who might grant them a more lively and joyful pleasure. She squeezes her eyes shut, and with renewed strength grasps his nape and pulls him to her lips – her eyes squeezed shut. Yes. Every morning reborn, she searches for a new vision of a man, not the one she shared a bed with last night.

Kiyoko and Akihide believed they would not be able to tell lies if they did not exchange letters. If they decided to lie, the opportunity (sending a letter) would cast a spell on the lie. However if they were separated without letters in Karuizawa and Hakone, they wouldn't know what the other was doing. Come to think of it, it is foolish to fear that one's conscience can not stand alone, while depending on that conscience. Surely the conscience first becomes dependable when it is made to stand alone.

In Kiyoko and Akihide's case, at some point this small promise grew like ivy and spread to places they had not anticipated. The promise itself did not put any shackles on them, but that they not exchange letters. Yet because the promise stood witness to their conscience, it came to seem a promise that protected their fidelity. Thereafter they felt that if Akihide merely thought someone other than Kiyoko a nice person, or vice versa, it would go against the promise and be morally wrong.

However, one day a special delivery letter from Akihide arrived. According to their promise, it was sent to the attention of Mr. Yamauchi, and announced that he would be coming to visit soon.

Kiyoko went to the station to meet him. Akihide spotted Kiyoko immediately from across the crowd. She was not standing with the other people who had rushed up to the gate to meet the train. He wondered if she really was waiting for him, leaning on her bicycle. It looked natural and honest.

Passing through the gate, Akihide suddenly felt a premonition that Kiyoko would look his way. Just then, Kiyoko turned and smiled unhesitatingly as though she had spotted him earlier but had let him come to her.

Bowing once, they stood without speaking. People passing nearby looked over. For a short while they both felt the other had changed. Even so, intimate feelings by the hundreds came to them.

Why? Perhaps the strong summer sun had spread light into their hearts, and promoted the growth of their beautiful fantasies. The fantasies had spread so within them that even that which was Kiyoko and Akihide seemed to be no more than clothing, hiding the fantasies from human eyes. Kiyoko and Akihide were paralyzed as their own figures which were not themselves, and the other's figure which was, subtly mixed.

Kiyoko could not directly speak to or see the figure of Saeki, which resided inside herself; she could only do so when Saeki was reflected in the mirror of Akihide, like a pair of mirrors. It was the same for Akihide. Thus the two mirrors could only speak to each other with their fantasies mediating. Shape and shadow faithfully reflected each other and could not be differentiated. The shadow which was shape and the shape which was shadow could also exchange intimate smiles...

Munehisa's little cousin (he was still in his first year of middle school) came one day to play and single-handedly disrupted the quiet air of the Yamauchi house. Picking out only the words he knew from the English newspaper, he read them in a loud voice. Munehisa had always been a good playmate to him, but for some reason today he was annoyed and kept to himself. He didn't want to horse around as this child's equal in front of Akihide. When next to Akihide, Munehisa angrily felt the wretchedness of his own youth. Thus, brow furrowed, he frowned upon his noisy cousin.

The cousin approached Akihide familiarly. He was in the habit of looking down on people arrogantly, but as in this case he would only be looking down on Akihide's legs, he forced Akihide to sit in a chair.

"Have you ever been to K ranch? I went yesterday with Hoshino and Morimura."

"You walked that far?"

"Bicycled, of course."

"Koh. Your language is rude. I'll tell your mother." Kiyoko said from her chair set slightly apart while she cut silk.

Without even looking back at her, the little cousin expounded on various pieces of information he had gotten the day before. The fact that the milk they drank every day was carried over twenty Kilometers up a mountain slope and that it was the work of a quiet horse with two barrels on its back and a twelve of thirteen year old child, and that he once met that horse on the road to the races, so maybe it was a horse who had raced long ago.

While replying to the babbling of this youth, Akihide felt the whimsical desire to go to this ranch, set apart from the village.

"If the weather's nice tomorrow, shall we go?" he asked Kiyoko.

"It's a children's place."

"So what, you're still a child." The little cousin bristled.

The branches of green leaves outside the window shook wildly and Kiyoko looked out. It seemed a squirrel had passed by.

"Tomorrow will be good weather. Definitely." She called cheerfully to her brother. "Hisa, are you using your bicycle tomorrow?"

Not only had Akihide's whim spread to Kiyoko, it seemed that for some reason the vitality of the women flashing past like a school of fish on their bicycles had come back to her. She hurried the trip because she was eager to decide a difficult thought.

Mr. Yamauchi was interested when he heard their plan. From the first he didn't believe their plan was for a somber picnic. The Baron was glad they were adding a frivolous whim to their quiet and extremely domestic but monotonous lifestyle. He felt that Akihide's childish plan saved him from the depression of having tired of the plans he had made himself but lacking the courage to bread them of his own accord.

At dinner, he recalled the names of various sweets and told Mrs. Yamauchi to make them and put them in the lunch boxes. It was decided that only the old servant should wake up as they had to leave the next

morning around five a.m. When they retired to their bedrooms that night, Mr. Yamauchi turned to Akihide and Kiyoko and bade them goodbye beforehand.

“Well, have a nice trip.”

It was a cold morning enshrouded in fog. There were no people about. From one of the gates, the howling of a dog rose up and chased after their bikes. The dog could not be seen for the fog, though they could hear its barking and rasping breath clearly.

They crossed the railroad tracks and briefly rode on the wide road running along the horse tracks. Fog hung on the fields in patches. The primroses, drenched in the midst of the fog, looked like hundreds of beacons.

As they passed by the horse tracks and the road sloped upwards to the mountain pass, the fog cleared, and the surrounding mountain pass, the fog cleared, and the surrounding mountains gave off a faint lavender light. They got off their bikes and climbed the hill pushing them. Kiyoko did not rest until Akihide suggested it. The first time he did so, Kiyoko smiled wearily.

“I really am tired. When I look down as I push the bicycle, I see yellow butterflies flitting about my legs. Looking at them my eyes swim and I get dizzy.”

“You should have said something earlier.” Akihide said, laughing.

From then on they rested occasionally as they climbed up the deserted mountain path. Once in a while they caught glimpses of fountains and clumps of moist fern, but in amongst the trees were only weeds and bamboo. Behind them, the heavy smoky shadow of Mt. Asama hung over them, dying the glazed ceramic sky blue.

After twenty minutes they finally reached the top. There it was completely clear with only some gracefully moving clouds. Mt. Myogi sparkling to the east and the Japanese Alps facing them to the west were refreshingly differentiated by the subtle shading of the sun and clouds. The blueness of the sky in the direction of the mountains seemed a part of the ocean, and the cloud formations were those often seen over the sea. It looked as though the near horizon had suddenly disappeared.

Again they mounted their bikes and cautiously descended the steep slope of the mountain pass. A deep ravine and a cedar forest appeared. Within, a river flowed sending up a splash.

The rock surface of the river bottom had become smooth as a mirror and it seemed to reflect the flow of water. Wagtails flew about excitedly. They sent up monotonous birdcalls, sounding like a handmill turning in the woods.

It was still only eight a.m.

The two ate their breakfast on top of a rock near the cold water.

Continuing on, they again began a gentle slope up the mountain path. As before, Kiyoko and Akihide climbed it pushing their bicycles and occasionally resting. Neither spoke. They began to feel that this toil was not a sacrifice for themselves but for their mutual benefit. Thus the silence did not cast a shadow on their hearts, but rather seemed a decoration on the quiet peace of the wild mountain.

Arriving at the top, they entrusted their bicycles to a peasant cottage with an ancient wide garden and from there climbed on foot up the single narrow trail to the ranch.

“This is where Koh climbed.”

“Yes, he bragged about this, didn’t he?”

Coming to a rock ledge, the peaceful sound of a bell echoed from around the corner. Then came a smell conspicuously more pungent than the smell of young leaves. They stepped off the path. A dirty-faced youth pulling a horse bearing a barrel on its back came down the mountain path. It was just as the little cousin had said – the horse which carried milk to the city of Karuizawa. As they watched the horse’s chestnut colored rump sparkling in the sunrays as though painted in oils, they suddenly felt the intensity of the sun.

The hot air of the woods flushed their bowed faces as they walked.

“Just a little farther.”

“I can see it already.” Kiyoko said, squinting.

“I don’t see it yet.” Akihide imitated her squint, and a mirage of the white hut, the first sign of the ranch, appeared through the grasses and thick green trees.

The sudden mooing of a cow close at hand startled them both.

Now the ranch hut became a reality, appearing between the clouds and the blue sky. Then the ranch spread out as far as they could see. Red and white daisies swayed in the oppressive summer wind.

Five or six collies lounging in front of the hut ran toward Akihide for affection. They arrived at the

hut followed by the dogs.

A hard of hearing caretaker in a torn vest came out. Akihide asked for some milk and they drank it together.

Then they walked about the ranch.

On the far grassy hill clustered a herd of wheat colored cows. When the gentle shadows of the clouds passed overhead they looked like a scene from a painting.

On a nearby grassy area, separated from the herd, a large bull leisurely ate his way forward.

A cowboy was chasing one group of cows toward Mt. Monomi. A collie with a white lace collar followed after him like his assistant.

Kiyoko and Akihide found a moderate slope and sat down.

The sun was in the middle of the sky. The distant mountains were lined up in a row, tinged with the brightness of fake jewels or seashells, purple in some areas, green in others, and the remaining snow sparkling like mother of pearl.

The summer grass extended tough thick leaves amongst the soft cow grass. Yet the yellow flowers lit up within were lovely.

The clouds moved at a meticulous, steady pace above this scenery. The passing of their shadows over the ranch, shrinking and distorting as they fell on each depression or bump, looked peaceful.

Akihide relaxed and stretched out on the grass. His heart was eased by the pleasant fatigue, as though he was soaking in a luke warm bath. By his side, Kiyoko absorbed herself by plucking grass and weaving it together.

It was as though a moment of heaven in all its innocence had fallen down to them.

Akihide recalled the flowered field by the lakeside with Yoshiko at S plain. It was not a chaste memory. Over time it had begun to smell of the flesh.

Now, the dazzling summer sun which seemed to be sweeping him idleness, numbing everything to inaction, caused an oddly pure, ordered throbbing of the spirit. Akihide squinted and drowsed off. Behind his eyelids hung a fog filled with glittering crimson. The mere fact that Kiyoko was there by his side enticed him to a miraculous, almost painful happiness. Kiyoko believed that her shadow occupied a precise seat inside Akihide when his eyes were shut – she didn't even need to believe it anymore. Kiyoko recognized that Akihide – the mask of her fantasy – no longer even mediated her fantasy, he was no more than the clothing which hugged the illusion. Kiyoko exchanged her emptiness for Akihide's and Akihide appropriated hers as his own. They dreamed of exact opposite universes in completely reversed, opposite directions. The supreme emotions they shared were rooted therein. They filled each other with the boundless empty space in their backgrounds.

Kiyoko guided Akihide's head softly into her lap. This behavior was not accompanied by any shame, nor did it seem to have been done on purpose. They both felt, excluding themselves, that here were undoubtedly two lovers.

The summer sun shined on with increasing strength. Kiyoko and Akihide's body heat rose to that of the blades of summer grass. Then, as though taking over all of their flesh, the sun dried their lips and burned their hair. It took every word from their mouths. They heard the chirping of cicadas in the far woods. The two sat motionless as sculptures decorated not by flowers, but by the clouds that reflected the bright light and the stirring of the far away cicadas.

It seemed they had been trapped in a mold. They did not feel like asking the other in fun "what are you thinking?" Due to the mold and the sunlight, their lips did not move easily.

Kiyoko looked into Akihide's eyes. As the clouds passed over they sparkled like a fountain. In them a huge image of Yoshiko, who had brought them together in this secret conspiracy, related to the structure within Kiyoko, towered over her with an inanimate beauty, distinct from love and from jealousy. The ship Kiyoko and Akihide were on picked up speed little by little and headed toward those giant illusions, like an exploration voyage to the open seas.

CHAPTER FIVE

A CAREFUL CONSPIRACY PT. II

Elisa: Are you leaving the door open?

Captain: If you wish.

Elisa: All right.

- Strindberg, Dance of Death

When a mother sees signs of her own son beginning secret consultations with the beautiful daughter of another family, a certain excitement is added to her emotional life. The ache in a woman's breast which is essential to her happiness, and her anxiety while waiting for the marriage proposal, lives even stronger in the mother who must hear her son's frank confession at some point than in the maiden of the other family who must herself receive the proposal. Countess Fujimura could not be unaware of the fact that she felt absolutely none of this joyful anxiety or fluttering of the heart during the negotiations this summer between Akihide and Kiyoko Yamauchi. The particulars of this love followed the humiliating conclusion of last summer's affair between Akihide and Yoshiko Harada and at first looked only like a manifestation of the impertinence of youth. As though she had foreseen the effect of Akihide's painful disappointment last summer, from the beginning Mrs. Fujimura had looked on the young couple with the heavily emotional worry of a middle-aged woman. She made a show of the loneliness of a woman who is in a position to give moral lessons, and even sulked before her son. However, a wise woman understands that all of these emotions are only her own jealousy toward youth. To be precise, she perceived it as an uncompromising stubborn mask on guard against the tendency of her own small amount of remaining youth to make disproportionate plans, tempted by the considerable extravagance of the youth before her eyes, and to protect at all costs her meager "youth" from that danger. Mrs. Fujimura had never heard such a horrible sound as that of her own remaining youth, awakening within her that summer, sending cracks into every nook of her heart, like furniture which has been in the sun all day, parching late at night.

Yet Mrs. Fujimura had already forgotten during the past year that this was jealousy. She had fallen out of the habit of listening carefully to her own heart, and placed more importance on the silly conviction that her subconscious emotions would divine her son's level of happiness. Based on the precise intuition springing from a mother's moralistic love, she believed that her current enjoyable anxiety did not include any other impure motive than to wish only that all go well for her son.

Perhaps one could say that Mrs. Fujimura's honesty was simply due to her age. But could one's aging speed up so in just one year? Didn't this sudden surrender of her youth include an element of betrayal? What Mrs. Fujimura felt about the relations between Kiyoko and Akihide did not seem to make her feel even a little danger to her youth. Which indicated that suddenly Mrs. Fujimura had become generous in the consumption of the little youth left her. Was she rushing age and decline? Certainly there was no reason to do so. One strong desire born inside of her sought some form of "sacrifice" from her. It is natural that the blind act of sacrifice would manifest itself as motherly love toward Akihide and Kiyoko, because no act disguises its purpose to the extent that sacrifice does. From this it is clear that Mrs. Fujimura, who had loved her son until last summer as a mother, did not love her son anymore this summer. If so, the uneasy excitement in her heart as she anticipated her son's confession might have been a transformation of feelings which had the same source as the demand for sacrifice.

Supposedly only love has the right to demand sacrifice. Thanks to the blindness of love, Mrs. Fujimura was able to spend the summer without realizing she had fallen in love with Baron Yamauchi, the father of Kiyoko and her old lover. She was satisfied to see how calm she was, her intellect more keen-edged than ever, when she met Yamauchi. However, as we know, happiness can be ascertained only by the intellect. — She had shifted the blame for the emotional pain and anxiety she felt during the times she was not with Yamauchi to motherly expectations for Akihide and Kiyoko; and to the persistent, repeated anger she felt toward the suspicion expressed by Count Fujimura at the family center when he returned from his early summer sightseeing trip — a suspicion emphasized by the fact that for the first time Mr. Fujimura felt he had the right to express it. This was also the reason she couldn't believe love could be such an easy, painless emotion. Shouldn't the revival of a middle-aged woman's love be more passionate, more of a fuss, as she read in novels?

Strangely, Mrs. Fujimura's emotions even felt to Akihide like an extremely heavy burden of love. He simply clung to the fallacy of her "motherly love" through the natural politeness of a son.

On his way from Karuizawa to Tokyo in early September, Akihide visited his father and mother who still remained at the Gora villa. Distant thunder boomed and fog hung in the cedars, left over from the heat of the day. Count Fujimura had just awoken from a nap. Akihide thought this information from the servant suspicious. Until now the Count had been a person who rarely napped. Even if he was napping, he tried to convince his son that he was reading in his study. Akihide knew that the Count's old-fashioned pride was actually a manifestation of youthful vanity disguised as old-fashioned manners, but there were many times when he sympathized with the shyness with which the Count occasionally tried out an awkward, antiquated

admonition, his youthful vanity being too much for him to always handle by himself. If that same Count now napped until late afternoon, doubtless the atmosphere at the villa had caused him to.

Mrs. Fujimura, entrusting all actual services like steamed towels, chilled melon and orange juice, and the hot spring bath to the servants, circled around her son whom she hadn't seen for two weeks, full of curiosity, standing and sitting busily but with no purpose. Akihide, having returned home suddenly, though he had planned to remain absent, now felt like his mother's pet dog.

"How was Karuizawa? Is Kiyoko well? Does such a quiet person play tennis and ride horses? Didn't you meet Moriyasu's Aunt or Kigatera or Mikawa?"

Today Akihide felt there was something imprudent in the care with which his mother smoothly slipped Yamauchi's name into the consecutive string of these and other proper nouns she spewed out, both known and unknown to Akihide. Baron Yamauchi, in contrast, had asked for detailed news of Mrs. Fujimura while Akihide was staying with them, with such an innocent straightforwardness, like a grade-schooler, that he had not been suspicious at all.

Akihide went to his father's room to greet him. The mosquito smudge had been used up, and his father was crouching to relight it. The Count never ordered anything from the servants when he was in a bad mood. Akihide sensed the unpleasantness of an old man in the back of that yukata. From the Count's point of view, he had only presented a mean-spirited aspect in order to avoid a scene in which he would face Akihide purely as a father. He had felt a presentiment in Akihide's tone as he entered the room of the resurrection in yet another form of that annoyance he had caused by giving advice to Akihide the morning after he returned from his early summer trip, or of the embarrassment they'd both felt when he met Akihide halfway up the stairs on the occasion of Yamauchi's first visit that spring. If Akihide were not his son, but merely a very young junior at work, the Count would probably have behaved very much like a father.

"Oh. Welcome home." The Count said in a voice he had somehow concocted.

"Excuse me." Akihide's mother rushed into the room with a smudge on a lidless incense dish. "When it gets dark the mosquitos will soon get ferocious."

"Oh yes. Thank you."

As far as Akihide knew, Mrs. Fujimura had never before brought the mosquito smudge herself. However, what was even stranger was that his father indifferently put the new smudge she had brought right next to the smudge he had lit himself instead of refusing it, and that his mother pretended to notice neither the fact that his father had lit one, nor the smell of mosquito smudge in the room. Akihide felt this was a sign of deep discord between his father and mother. It was not the discord which follows a head-on quarrel, it was a sluggish discord as though day by day it was becoming the most important part of their lives.

After exchanging a few words of lifeless conversation with his father, enveloped in the smoke from two smudges, the servant came in to inform him his clothes were ready. Akihide went to the living room. Again his mother hung around aimlessly while the maidservant fastened his robe with a belt of a white splash pattern. However, her excitability was not without cause.

When Akihide was dressed, Mrs. Fujimura fixed the robe herself. "Oh you, again the back sewing is crooked." She said, her voice trembling.

Suddenly she whispered oppressively. "Listen Akihide, please hurry and marry Kiyoko. This time Mommy will help you as much as she can, so go ahead, have courage."

By nature, Mrs. Fujimura's voice was not suited to melodrama. Particularly when she gave voice to such desperate words of vengeance, it was too similar to the voice of a lead drama student who ends up reading in a high-pitched deadpan trying to get through some difficult lines quickly. Akihide couldn't hear. Rather, he contrived to doubt his ears because his indifference was too excessive to answer to such a tense emotional outburst from his mother.

"What?"

"I said mommy will help you with all her might."

Turning suddenly, Akihide read only entreaty in his mother's eyes. He feared that from that time on he might hate his mother.

Fall visited like a deep sigh and the Yamauchi and Fujimura families left their resorts. Intercourse between the Fujimura and Yamauchi houses became even more frequent than before. Mrs. Fujimura and Mr. Yamauchi met frequently. Akihide and Kiyoko met even more regularly. Only Count Fujimura stubbornly avoided meeting Baron Yamauchi.

Actually, one could say that there lay almost no suspicion of Mr. Yamauchi in the Count's perverse

behavior. Mrs. Fujimura's suspicion, feeding on itself, was rather interesting to the Count. The fact that he felt like a spectator was a reaction to the stench of his wife's schoolgirl curiosity and her discussion of the particulars on Akihide and Kiyoko which reached him under his mask of annoyance. Since the incident at the family center Mrs. Fujimura seemed to have resolved not to speak to her husband unless necessary. When she suddenly began speaking, as though she'd forgotten that resolution, her words were limited to Akihide's new love. The Count guessed at his wife's state of mind: perhaps it bothered her to spend this summer with a husband she was at odds with (last summer when there was no particular shadow of discord the Count had been at Gora and she had been at S plain with Akihide), or perhaps she was plotting a tragic life for the last of her charm, paining herself and her husband while living together for a long summer. But those thoughts were pointless, and the Count came to think that maybe his wife simply chose her husband as an unconcerned audience when she wanted to say a few things about Akihide and Kiyoko that summer.

Thanks to the characteristic self-esteem which ran in the Fujimura family, the Count felt good about his own position, that of pretending to be oblivious to his son's love problems out of respect for his son (a sort of English "social phrasing of emotions"). In order to avoid imitating the type of "good father" which was the latest fashion, who allows everything but pretends not to see, (the type the Count was most contemptuous of because of his aristocratic pride) it was also necessary to occasionally espouse meaningless opposed opinions, to speak sarcastically, and – his specialty – to drop old-fashioned, absolutely unheartfelt warnings. The Count had granted his permission to the match with Yoshiko last summer in the confusion of the various masquerades his own heart put on without hearing the details or asking about the prospects. Learning from that bitter experience, he intended to grant permission to this match at the proper time after viewing the pair for a slightly longer period (though during that time he would have to endure his own tiresome masquerade). His wife instantly believed her husband's hesitation to answer was related to Yamauchi, but her suspicions were interesting to the Count only as the problems of a stranger might be. That did not prevent it from being unpleasant as a family problem at the same time. Behind that one small emotional incident which had spectacularly destroyed the cheer of his delightful May trip, a hatred toward Yamauchi whenever he glimpsed signs of him, grew up distinct from his feeling of well being. The Count knew of rare situations when contempt (almost like jealousy) caused nothing but pain to the person who was contemptuous.

One day, as the fall gradually passed, the Fujimuras were invited to a wedding dinner for the nephew of a new House of Lords friend, Kawamori, and went to the Imperial Hotel. More than half of the guests were elderly, in fact many of the couples were slightly out of place for a wedding dinner. They were people who knew well the barely significant meaning of empty formalities. The wedding ceremony itself is like fire insurance. If everyone attends one hundred wedding ceremonies during their lifetime, and if within those hundred weddings one is their own, then society, though it appears to be tied together by meaningful wedding ceremonies, is actually supported by the 99 empty formalities. The 99 empty ceremonies shape the remaining real one as if they had ganged up on it. Usually the men of these odd couples talked amongst themselves about work at the ceremony, making bitter faces like they were chewing on bugs; the women, with some young ladies mixed in, talked of nothing but opera, cosmetics, or the tyranny and childishness of the men. The white napes of the ladies and reflections from numberless eyeglasses glimmered dimly amidst the cloud of smoke in the reception room. The sight of hundreds of people talking and laughing at once was a somehow pathetic scene.

Suddenly Mrs. Fujimura turned to the wall, took out a small mirror and faced it askant under the indirect lighting. Then she shut it quickly and approached her husband.

"You'll be here won't you? I'm going to fix my face."

The Count had thought her eye makeup ugly. The white powder looked disgustingly bluish. – A moment ago the Count had said to his wife "Go fix your face" in a soft voice. Without answering she had gone to the corner. The Count watched her take out the mirror. Mrs. Fujimura felt strangely spirited as she went hurriedly to the bathroom through the crowd having purposely returned to his side and carried out this militaresque repetition in order to indicate that the act of fixing her face had been her own decision. Yet she had not stirred hostility in the Count. He was only thinking, with the artless mood of a child, that his wife looked ugly. He did not even shudder as he had as a youth when he saw an ugly woman, he only thought "ugly" with the same reflection as he might think "sleepy."

In place of his wife, a relatively stout youth with glasses approached Count Fujimura from a nook in the corridor where many young people were gathered, smiling his way through the crowd at ease. "Excuse me, excuse me" he seemed to be murmuring as he parted the crowd. Excessive civility to the point of slight

affectation in the youth's endless smiles and bowing recalled to the Count suddenly the student receptionist at the Gakushuin festival who had guided the guests to their seats with showy congeniality and a purple ribbon on his chest. The youth immediately understood that the Count, who had fixed his eyes on him, recognized his face and greeted him accordingly.

"Mr. Fujimura, I'm sorry it's been so long."

The count stared at his face for a moment with the look of cold politeness he took in situations where he could not recall a person's identity.

"Oh, I'm Niikura. A classmate of Akihide's."

"Ah. I'm sorry. I completely didn't recognize you. Please forgive me, it's my old age."

"Of course not. You look so young I almost didn't recognize you myself."

Count Fujimura smiled. He felt it'd been a long time since this wry smile had formed on his lips. The Count must have seen through the tricks of this youth's maturity – a maturity which acknowledged the Count and his peers respectable men. Because this young man resembled the Count in his youth so much. The Count waited for his next words with the peculiar sentimental look, mixed love and hate, of a person looking back on his own youth.

The happy conviction that one's own good faith can move anyone constantly glowed in Niikura's youth ful red cheeks. It seemed he'd decided that he already had this elderly gentlemna in his pocket. His horribly polite, yet horribly rude garulousness began.

"I'm a close relative of today's bride. Did you come as a friend of Kawamori?"

After continuing this kind of sociat exchange for several minutes, Niikura said "Actually Mr. Fujimura" assuming an overly serious and, for the first time, a youthful expression, "there is something I wanted to discuss with you concerning Akihide. If we could speak somewhere in town, rather than at your house... Is there a convenient place we could meet tomorrow or the next day?"

The Count was not one to return a light question like "about what?" It wasn't that he didn't want to be seen making a big deal of it, rather it would be more appropriate to say, that matters having chanced to touch on Akihide, the Count immediately pushed such light questions out of reach inside himself, having suddenly felt an outsider's scolding eyes on him for avoiding his fatherly role.

"Tomorrow... yes, tomorrow I had no plans to go out, but... (a confused Kyoto accent came out) fine, let's meet shortly before noon, at the German restaurant Kirsch under the cherry signboard in West Ginza."

The Count quickly took in the figure of hiw wife returning and added hurriedly, "This is something my wife doesn't know about?"

"Yes, please come alone."

"Fine."

"Ah! Niikura! Akihide came home the other day... How good of you to remember my husband." The eyes of the smiling Mrs. Fujimura were charmingly shaded and when viewed from the side were the long slim middle-eastern eyes of a woman in a Persian drawing.

The next day at noon, when the Count pushed open the door of Kirsch in the basement of a building, and scanned the corners of the lounge, Niikura was sitting comfortably in an easy chair, turning his thick glasses this way and that. As the Count neared his side, his whole face filled with a smile and he bowed with arrogant politeness, perhaps in imitation of his father. The Count did not take to Niikura's overly happy face. It resembled the face of a son who feels he must furrow his brow when he hears tactless guests laughing loudly at the wake of his strict father, though he too is thoroughly relieved by the death. The night before, while the Count was being tortured by a vague anxiety, he had discovered that he was hoping for aid from this Niikura youth. Had Niikura met him with a grave face, the Count would probably have felt relieved. Niikura should not have assumed the posture of comforting the Count, it would have been more suitable to their age difference had he taken a stance of suffering together with the Count. Yet perhaps an incomprehensible wish for the enhancement of his anxiety, a form of love that would punish him, had sprouted up in the Count's heart. Niikura's smiling face wounded the Count, as though Akihide were being laughed at behind his back. Had anything before now caused him such pain?

"Hello. I'm sorry I kept you waiting. You'll have a drink? How about brandy? Or should we eat right away?"

"It makes no difference to me."

"Then we should eat first. One can't have a discussion swooning on an empty stomach."

Niikura had thought that only a stiff, refined heart like a starched collar lived inside the Count in whom he had until now only seen arrogance, but today it seemed that something brittle and fragile was at work within him. Therefore the coldness frozen in the Count's tone was in further contrast.

"It's not that kind of talk. I think it will be cause for rejoicing."

"Oh, I rarely rejoice."

They were guided to a table in the back and the Count gazed around with a contemptuous stare at the decorations on the surrounding walls – ads for Munich beer, a grotesque print styled after Brueghel, a color drawing by Sans souci, flowers stuck in a bugle. Then he turned the same look on Niikura.

"Well, you wanted to discuss something."

"Yes, that is..." Niikura scratched his head unconsciously adopting a schoolboyish demeanor, and finishing off the aperitif recommended by the Count, said "actually, Akihide asked me to speak to you, but it is a secret. You see he asked me to speak to you as though it were completely on my own whim. But to proceed to the matter..." He seemed to delight in such trite phrases.

"I believe you know Kiyoko Yamauchi?"

"Yes, I know her."

"Akihide is in love with Kiyoko."

"Wait just a minute. You have this from Akihide's mouth?"

"Yes." He answered in decisive tones as though he were reciting. "According to Akihide, only those who are impartial to a matter can tell the truth. I think that Akihide, as an honest person, is suffering because everytime he opens his mouth he ends up lying. He says that even if he summoned up the courage to speak frankly to you, he feels he would immediately end up lying. But because I am impartial, if I were to speak to you, Akihide's true thoughts would be communicated. How would you feel about their marriage?"

The Count felt neither surprise nor anger while listening to this but simply a loathing for Niikura as he claimed to be telling the truth, because by nature the Count believed that the random talk of impartial people calling a spade a spade was only a "truth-like" fantasy dreamed of by society.

"Really? It's quite hard for me to swallow."

Holding his silver fork in a dry white hand and running it over his plate with an aristocratic polished motion, the Count felt a secret mischievous pleasure at the fact that he was neither surprised nor agitated. Suddenly, he set his knife and fork on the plate and touched the knot of his bow tie with his right hand. He felt by touch that it was neatly tied and lightly cleared his throat with satisfaction.

"Are you saying that I am lying? What would it profit me..." Niikura grew excited. However, his angry face was based on his characteristic calculation that it was occasionally necessary when coaxing the elderly to express an immature, rash passion. – Surely this behavior would have an effect on Count Fujimura as well? Niikura was trying to flatter the superiority complex peculiar to the elderly when they view a youth's anger with a lenient smile. However, an indescribably youthful ness beyond all of Niikura's calculations flashed over the Count's face exposing Niikura's faked youth. The Count prepared himself. He would protect that truth he believed in from being wounded by the truth coming out of Niikura's mouth.

"Mr. Niikura, the meaning of 'truth' as you speak of it, and the 'truth' I mention are slightly different. Even if my son had asked you to fill this role, I can affirm that I did not educate him in such a way. (As he spoke he thought what a convenient word 'educate' was.) First of all, he has a mother doesn't he? Who taught him to talk to me through a friend's mouth rather than going through his mother I wonder? I'm not saying it is you..."

Without touching his German fried Bass, the Count nervously rattled his fork on top of the tablecloth with the fingertips of his left hand while speaking and was suddenly startled to realize that if he persisted in this way his own words would trap him. He had been about to confess to the discord between his wife and himself in front of Niikura on this first trifling pretext. Suddenly he had an insight. It was the thought he had pushed away and hidden in his confusion that time he had bumped into Akihide halfway up the stairway, but now thanks to his suddenly resurrected youth, it again appeared before him. The youth of his absent wife was in unexpected sympathy with his remaining youth. The Count felt with a passionate premonition that from now on, he could hate his wife with his entire soul like a young man.

"Niikura. I have known for a long time. Your role today comes wholly from my wife, doesn't it? Akihide doesn't know a thing about it, does he?"

"That's completely untrue." Niikura opened his eyes wide, portraying denial splendidly. However, this skillful portrayal resembled too closely the situation in which an untalented actor gives a death scene on stage and by coincidence actually dies at the very same time, thereby enabling him a once in a lifetime

performance. His eyes did not express anything other than surprise, and that pointed to the bull's eye.

"If you do not pretend that Akihide is unaware of our talk I will be in trouble. So I am reassured that you say so. However, to say that I was asked to do anything by his mother..."

"I am touched by your courtesy. However, I would like to take it from here within the family. I, at least, think that I am a father of understanding. Even if this is a delusion, please do not shatter my empty dreams."

"I am very sorry if I said something to upset you so. But please believe that I care strongly for Akihide as a friend."

Akihide was lucky to have a friend who believed so confidently in ambiguous things like friendship, because he could teach Akihide, not friendship, but the way to believe in friendship. This is the first step to knowledge of the world.

"I understand you completely. Well, our food is getting cold." It was now necessary to touch the fish he had let cool, not wanting to eat in the momentum of the talk, and the Count braced himself for the bad taste.

"Setting that discussion aside, how were those recent pictures at Matsuhita's?"

"Ah, the recent pictures..." It seemed Niikura did not know what to say. For the first time his good will had not gotten across and he had lost face. He thought it strange that one couldn't see the passing of trains and cars through the lace window curtains. Forgetting that this was the basement. Forgetting that through the window one would see only plants covered with pale dust in the underground corridor.

"But you..." The alcohol had finally reached the Count, and with his plump-cheeked face slightly reddened, he said in a high voice, "it pleases me that you place importance on friendship, though it doesn't suit you age. It seems that recently young people throw out a friendship like trash if it isn't convenient, and never look back. They mistake that kind of behavior for youthfulness. It's troubling."

He probably flattered him in this old-fashioned, transparent way because the renewed flames of youthful passion – hatred for his wife – were beginning to cheer him.

When dinner was over and Niikura said he was returning directly home, the Count stopped a taxi and announced that he would see Niikura to his door.

"I always get taxi drivers with beards" the Count whispered to Niikura in a low voice so the driver could not hear, whirling his walking stick between his hands. "It's strange. If I tried to stop one with a beard, I would definitely get one without. But when I stop one without thinking about it he's always got a beard. It's really strange." He peered into the wide open eyes of Niikura, who had never seen the Count like this. "Do you know how many taxi drivers throughout Tokyo have beards?"

Akihide and Kiyoko were out somewhere for dinner, so the Count took supper alone with his wife when she returned in the evening. The Count was more garrulous than usual, letting fly rather tasteless jokes. Mrs. Fujimura found her husband exactly as he was when he returned from travels.

Their garden was certainly not large, but a pleasing mountain stream flowed through it, and as they purposely allowed the fall grass to grow wild, the chirping of insects sounded from every corner. A small path to the lawn in front of the western rooms made a gentle detour, passable even in the dark of night, from the separate tea room (which the Count had almost been forced to build on the suggestion of his younger brother Akinobu in Kyoto, but had left to ruin as Mrs. Fujimura had no interest in tea ceremony), around the mountain stream, and by a dried up pond. Frequently they held Friday haiku meetings for the nobility in this garden. Since early autumn the Count had developed the habit of taking a trip around this path by himself after dinner. It seems that when forced into it, people come to love solitude. Perhaps the beauty of solitude lies in the fact that it is a necessity.

The insects sang, abundant as the Milky-way. Pale lightning bugs, left over from the summer, occasionally flashed across the cloudy sky. From a distance one could hear the strangely clear, gasping echoes and creaks of trains leaving the station grounds. The western rooms of the house were lit gaily. Chopin spread gradually from the piano into the garden. The light leaking from the windows seemed a quiet sparkle from the music.

Mrs. Fujimura realized (while calling the piano tuner) that she had not touched the piano since spring. It just happened that tonight after dinner she had felt like playing again for no reason. Actually, she had felt like playing many times before now. In fact there had been nights made unbearable with the desire to play, but her contrariness continued to block her. She was disgusted with herself when she thought up excuses to play even one note. But tonight there hadn't been time for any explanations to come forth, and without even questioning herself particularly, she had sat at the black lacquered chair and faced the piano.

The sound of the piano was sharply cut off.

"Who is that!"

The Count was rapping on the glass doors leading to the garden with the head of his walking stick. Halfway through his walk, the Count had decided to go inside, tempted by the sound of the piano and the light through the windows of the room. He had not meant to be mischievous. Unfortunately, the doors were locked. His little whim was discouraged (yes, as though in sympathy with his wife's whim to play the piano.) However, the action ran away with itself, and he ended up knocking loudly and impatiently on the door with the ivory head of his walking stick.

Who could say whether when this little smiling natural plan collapsed, it hurt the Count or Mrs. Fujimura? Who can tell us whether at that moment the couple simultaneously heard the echo of something come crashing down?

Standing in the garden, Count Fujimura saw the instant of destruction clearly in the exposing light of the room. It was the instant the piano suddenly stopped and Mrs. Fujimura abruptly stood under the chandelier calling "Who is that!" Mrs. Fujimura stood as though making an ugly threat, almost pushing out her chest. Because she was directly under the light, dark shadows hung from her eyes and nose. Her thrust out chest, together with her obi, had an odd bulk, and the Count's instantaneous impression was of a pregnant woman. That woman walked toward him, pushing aside a chair with steps so filled with confidence she forgot discretion. With the back lighting, her face was completely dark.

When the glass doors were unlocked, the Count could only think of his wife's dark face as he had just now seen it, alienated from her by the glass. Barely sustaining a smile at her husband's mischief on top of her anger at the fright she'd had, Mrs. Fujimura tried to throw an impromptu joke at her husband as he entered the room. But the Count cut her off, and without even smiling threw out abrasive words in pride.

"I met Niikura today."

"Where?"

The Count settled his body deeply into an easy chair without answering. Mrs. Fujimura thought she had never seen him looking so hateful.

"Where did you meet him?"

"Kirsch. Yesterday at Kawamori's wedding he said he had to talk to me about Akihide, so I invited him to Kirsch."

"Oh, really?"

"I don't know. I don't understand. I don't like it."

"What was it?"

"Oh, sorry. I should speak more calmly. Akihide asked Niikura to inquire about my intentions for his marriage with Kiyoko."

"If you think there's something strange about that..." Mrs. Fujimura's voice became uncomfortable. "If so, please tell me."

"There's nothing strange. That's what Niikura said, and I refused to answer. Why doesn't Akihide ask my consent through you rather than through Niikura?"

Mrs. Fujimura did not understand the meaning of her husband's words for a moment. At first he had seemed to be reproaching Akihide. Mrs. Fujimura had listened under that impression. However with his last words, she had to think he was fishing for something. What could remain to be fished for?

"Well, what could Akihide be thinking..."

"Not Akihide. I'm asking what you are thinking."

"But you just said Akihide..."

"Why didn't you take it to me directly? You behave like a person with a guilty conscience."

At these first words of undisguised suspicion Mrs. Fujimura prepared herself, intending to answer honestly with the facts as they were: frustrated by your attitude of indifference to the young couple, though I had frequently spoken of them to you, I attempted to get your opinion through Niikura without Akihide's consent. She was filled with courage, not as a mother or a wife but as a woman, so much so that even her toes in their white socks inside her slippers felt firm.

"Yes, it is because I have a guilty conscience. You understand everything. There's something I want to talk to you about more than Akihide's affairs. It is to your disadvantage to indulge in base suspicions the way you do. It is not my fault that, thanks to your becoming so low, Mr. Yamauchi suddenly looks wonderful. Right now I respect Yamauchi much more than I do you. I only asked this from Niikura because, let alone respect you, I shrink from base emotions like yours."

“Must you use such a beautiful word as respect at this point? You ought to have the courage to be able to say ‘I love Yamauchi’.”

Count Fujimura was beyond rage. He felt it was ridiculous that he be so unreasonable labeled a base person. The Count’s pride was not wounded in the slightest at this – he could only find it amusing to act like a base person. When Akihide had visited his Uncle Akinobu in Kyoto this spring, Akinobu had said that the Fujimuras tended to only just barely endure life, thanks to their inability to give up good taste. Moments in which life tried to overcome this taste had occasionally visited Count Fujimura as well. But immediately, self-protecting reason resurrected itself, and returned him to a fragmentary impressionist, possessor of no lasting emotions (and as it were, a rather sharp cynic.) Presently the shadings of youthful hatred, ardently drawn during the conversation at lunch with Niikura, were rapidly fading from the Count’s face. Now it seemed as though only his wife, her fists clenched like a youth before his eyes, driven by intense emotions, held the right to love and hate. Yet Mrs. Fujimura granted a last unexpected pledge to her powerless husband, which he took as an expression of sympathy.

“You’re wrong. It is only respect. I do not love Yamauchi. No matter what you say, I do not love Yamauchi.”

It was cynicism that caused the Count, who had hardly flinched in the previous severe attack, to look incredibly surprised at this too clearly profitable statement. The Count stared at his wife with a doctor’s eye. He was frightened of what she would say next. He might have felt somewhat relieved if his wife had said that she loved Yamauchi. It seemed as though the Count had forgotten, under the anesthesia of this strange declaration just now, that he himself was the husband who had been living in the midst of a displeasure very similar to jealousy for several months – at least since early summer.

Mrs. Fujimura had never experienced a night more suited to the noiseless lightning skimming over the autumn sky. She sat sideways on a lacquer chair. The mirrored lacquer reflected the old-fashioned print of her plain, double-woven autumn obi.

She ruminated on the reckless declaration she had unthinkingly made just now. Had she said it in the heat of the moment? No, it wasn’t that. Yet she did not think she had said it expecting any particular result. It definitely was not a slip of the tongue, and yet she couldn’t think of it as the honest truth.

Her husband’s undisguised suspicion had saved her in this situation. It destroyed her desire to reveal the particulars of her request to Niikura, and strengthened her impromptu resolve to do nothing but lie. Mrs. Fujimura was unaware that behind her previous desire to measure her husband’s feelings through Niikura lay guilt over her unintentional love for Yamauchi. Thus she now thought that though it was a lie to say her love for Yamauchi was part of that motive, it was necessary in order to hate the Count purely. But she could not say that. It was hard to endure introducing her love for Yamauchi to a territory built on lies. She told a double lie when she said “I respect him.” All of her desires were dedicated to the pure aim of hating the Count.

“You ought to have the courage to be able to say ‘I love Yamauchi’.”

What did Mrs. Fujimura think when she heard this gentle sarcasm from her husband? She realized that the object of her hatred, loaded with the truth, was nothing but papier-mache. She understood that. The Count was now peering at her waiting for nothing from his wife but one sentence, ‘I love Yamauchi.’” The Count was merely observing the suffering of his wife who was stirred up by the embers of passion, smiling the weak smile of a withered old man.

At that instant Mrs. Fujimura understood that lying to a man who wasn’t worth her hatred was in fact an act of pure integrity. Without fearing that her love would be wounded by lies, Mrs. Fujimura exultantly told her first splendid lie unmotivated by hatred.

“I do not love Yamauchi. No matter what you say, I don’t love Yamauchi.”

A pair of lapis lazulis were twittering in the delicate bird house which hung from the window. The shadow of the birdhouse fell on the carpet, which smelled of a dry autumn morning. As the two birds flew back and forth excitedly their shadows flittered ceaselessly over the faded dragon pattern of the Persian rug. The sunlight did not reach to the Chavanne or the small landscape on the wall.

As always, Akihide’s desktop seemed to be both messy and neat. There was an odd system to the confusion and even the sunlit magazines had a certain smartness. As always, a pipe rode atop the artlessly piled old photo albums as though by magic.

Akihide, who had returned home late the night before, was called to the guest room immediately after he’d finished his breakfast. A servant brought the important sounding message to the dining room that the Count had a matter he’d like to discuss. Akihide exchanged a glance with his mother and saw that it was a

matter she had foreknowledge of.

“What does he want?”

“Don’t ask me. Go on, hurry up.” Mrs. Fujimura answered, feigning ignorance and scrutinized the shape of the autumn grasses in the flower arrangement she was patiently fixing on the mantel.

As soon as Akihide left for his father’s room, her legs went numb with fear. She almost couldn’t remain standing.

She decided to go to Akihide’s library on the second floor in order to hear the result from Akihide’s mouth alone. She would say she had come to borrow a book.

Mrs. Fujimura replaced the feed in the birdhouse. Then she gazed one by one at the portrait of Grandfather painted by the English portrait artist, Grandfather’s landscapes, the Chavanne, and a photo of Kiyoko placed respectfully among the books piled upon the desk. The twittering of the birds ran dizzily about in her head and she covered her ears with both hands.

Entering the room, Akihide saw his mother covering her ears and staring into space.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I... came to borrow a book.”

Akihide smiled at this confused excuse. Seeing his quiet smile she understood that her anxiety was very distant from Akihide.

“What did your father say?”

“He said I should marry Kiyoko.”

“He did? He really said that?”

For all her bravery, Mrs. Fujimura suddenly ran for the bed as though it had pulled her and resting her face on the scarlet satin bedspread, wept. Her husband, her son, and perhaps even Yamauchi were shut out of these happy tears: they created a joyful world of oblivion all her own.

Akihide sat in a chair near the window and waited for his mother to stop crying. He recalled his mother’s frightened face at the Hakone villa when she’d said ‘I’ll give you all the help I can.’ She did not stop crying.

Akihide thought vaguely that the annoying fluttering from the window was perhaps a flutter of happiness and gazed on the grief-filled sparkle of Autumn in the abundant lawn and thickets. Amidst that omnipresent light, all creation was silently ripening. Even the soaring gold bugs, occasionally inlaid on the drifting white clouds, helped only to make the splendid quiet of this silent ripening conspicuous.

Akihide stood and took his hat in his hand. “Well Mother, I’m going to tell Kiyoko.”

“Yes, go ahead. Please tell her your mother sends her kindest regards.”

Hearing his mother’s weeping voice, Akihide was finally able to feel a longing for all the things he had been kept from. He arranged the shape of his hat elaborately.

“I’m going Mother.”

“Wait a minute. When will the ceremony be?”

“Just choose any day that seems good.”

The passionate youth answered idly, leaving everything up to her. It was as though only his eyes belonged to a different person.

CHAPTER SIX

ACTION – A SHORT FINALE

“Endlessly feminine

It draws near to us”

- Goethe, Faust II

The double suicide of Kiyoko, daughter of Baron Yamauchi, and Akihide, son of Count Fujimura, on November -, 193-, on their wedding night, was immediately engulfed in a tide of speculation. There was neither suicide note nor any friends who knew the circumstances well. When people spoke of what might have caused them to commit suicide, they could guess nothing but excessive happiness. That alone should be reason enough, but society does not put its faith in “reason enough.”

Before long, a mystery was born. People learned a new doctrine: death is not summoned forth only to fill the vacuum of life, it can also be called forth to ascertain the fruits of life. Akihide and Kiyoko were imagined to be the most perfect lovers in the world. Parents were frightened by this strange fashion, and

vigilantly watched their children wondering if they too would choose death on their wedding night.

Niikura snared friends and repeated to them his trite personal view. "Well, you know, pleasure really is a solemn thing."

Mrs. Fujimura fell ill. An illness brought on by the humiliation of having been unable to scent even one secret pertaining to her son and the bride's death. Sleeping an entire week, she recovered. When her fever exceeded 39°C she had raved "I'm dying, I'm dying," but to her misfortune, she could not die. Since then, whenever she met someone she offered her opinion, that life is a continuous trial granted only to those who can endure the agony, and is endlessly more difficult than death.

Fujimura Akinobu in Kyoto was relieved to discover that he was not in the least sad at his nephew's death and did not particularly feel he was about to spill tears. He was a little too conscientious about crying only after first feeling relieved. Such well-balanced people are apt to be called callous.

The Yamauchis and Fujimuras gradually drew apart. Count Fujimura felt that his preparations for entering a placid old age were proceeding smoothly. For some reason, each time the Count sat before his son's and the bride's plaques, he recalled the scene of the crowd at Kawamori's wedding reception. They had talked avidly amidst the tobacco smoke of that lobby. There was not even one instant when words did not issue from their lips. It was almost work. The entire earth continued to babble like this.

"Today..." or "Excuse me for a moment..."

"That's sort of difficult" or "Let me think about it."

"What in the hell..." and "I love you."

The planet earth was a moon, spinning and chattering. Thanks to the continuous chatter, people didn't notice that the earth was no different from the thoroughly cold moon. The planet was a joker, and as long as no one noticed, it continued to spin, playing innocent.

Their continuous talking was a struggle to escape from life. They were in fact living. Yet they were constantly thinking about stalling for time to live. This lifestyle of showing coquetry toward life by avoiding it, is at times naively beautiful, like the coquetry of the young girls sung about occasionally in old pastoral songs:

Everyone hides in the shadow of the willow
But you can ask to be seen

Even so, by living without trying to escape life, surely one does nothing but advance toward death. Can we not live without this coquetry? Just as it is said that death will be visited upon us if we lack sleep for seven days, consciousness and the awakening to life can not be set aside, and will sooner or later send a person to death.

Akihide had been painfully, ceaselessly awake: clear proof of life. The Count guessed that that was what killed him. That was the reason Akihide and Kiyoko had gone, leaving behind a silence in this world instead of chatter. A secret which would never be explained.

The Count grew indignant wondering why this secret, this silence, had become so dear to them that they would not even try to endure life. Wasn't society arranged for the very purpose of giving birth to a single word? Why had they left like restless travelers, abandoning the preparations of their banquet?

The Count seemed to cast on their mortuary tablet that irritated gaze of mingled contempt and affection, peculiar to those old people who cherish young suicides.

However, it is the special privilege of youth to be able to die for an absurd reason. Even if you can't say that Akihide and Kiyoko's deaths were completely absurd, perhaps the effect of their deaths was even more vulgar and more frightening than the Count thought. The following episode is a subtle indication of the events in this period.

It happened on Christmas Eve, when the end of a year of endless condolences from morning to night drew near, and the traditional first snow of December 20 had passed in Tokyo. Times were tense given the impending war in Northern China, and Christmas that year was quite boisterous.

Yoshiko Harada was invited to an evening party at a certain house and attended with her new lover. A youth with young insolent eyes, a light black color Yoshiko liked, set in a full face. He looked as though he would be in pain for two or three days if you just grasped his hand too roughly. Yoshiko had just parted from Miyake that fall. The cause of their separation seems to have been absurd. However, popularity is a frightening thing. It seems that a beautiful woman who will divorce for some absurd reason is many times more captivating

to young men than a beauty who will marry for any absurd reason. Thus, as always, Yoshiko's days were filled with lively, exciting problems, and she was surrounded by direct and indirect spectators, announcers, and listeners. Yet for some reason she was afraid of her mirror. The rumor was sprinkled about that when she finished her painstaking makeup, she shut her three-sided mirror carelessly with a sharp snap.

When the Christmas dinner was over and the guests swarmed into another room to dance, a renowned dandy famous for his late arrivals entered the living room with the graceful step of an actor, deftly discerning the proper moment for his appearance. Yoshiko had heard his name, but saw his face for the first time tonight.

The hostess introduced them next to a decorative fir-tree.

"Mr. Saeki, this is Ms. Harada."

"Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure."

Yoshiko lifted her face and stared for the first time at this uniquely good-looking youth. To others, it seemed that their glance was sweet, but no sooner had their eyes met than both pairs opened wide with gloom as though they each had discovered a frightening, incomprehensible desolation in the other's face. They both tried desperately to escape the gaze of the other but an ugly presentiment moved from their eyes to their faces, covering their cheeks with the dark blue shade of the ocean at daybreak, filling their lips with the color and taste of ashes. For a short time they froze in fear. Yoshiko was the first to retreat, shivering, by two or three tiny steps.

At the same moment, both were driven by the impulse to lift their voices and speak of their frightening discovery in front of everyone. Now they understood that true beauty and eternal youth had been stolen from within both of them, root and all, by some clever thieves.